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# WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY.** EVERY WEEK.

## A FOOL FOR LUCK;

OR, THE BOY WHO TURNED BOSS. *By FRED. WARBURTON*



"We'll do you, too!" roared the Drum, as Ben jumped in to save his employer. "Pile in, fellers, an' kill 'em---the plunder's worth it!" The whole Hoo-hoo gang rallied and charged---a swarming avalanche of human greed and hate!



# WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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## A FOOL FOR LUCK

OR,

### THE BOY WHO TURNED BOSS

BY FRED WARBURTON

#### CHAPTER I.

##### "HERE'S YOUR HAT"

"How did it happen?" demanded John Desmond, sharply.

"Oh, that unutterable idiot, Wright, has blundered again."

"For about the one-hundredth time, eh?" demanded Mr. Desmond, staring sharply under his thick-set eyebrows.

"Just about the hundredth time, sir," nodded Prentice, the managing clerk of John Desmond's big New York commission office that dealt in canned meats.

"Send Wright in here," called Desmond, angrily.

"At once, sir."

Desmond tilted back in his office chair, behind his big, handsome roll-top desk at which he managed a business worth at least a quarter of a million dollars a year in clean-cut profits.

This proprietor of a great business was not a wholly pleasant man to look at at the best of times.

He was tall, broad, well-built—as far as mere appearance went—and had a rather distinguished-looking face.

But his eyes had a disagreeable way of flashing from under those bushy, thick-set eyebrows of his. His voice almost invariably was harsh and disagreeable. Generally, his face wore a cold, half-sneering expression when it was not positively angry.

Just now anger was written in every line of his face. Tap-tap!

"Come in," rasped Desmond.

The office door opened; the offender came quietly in.

He was a boy of about seventeen, tall, and rather slim.

There was a merry, innocent look almost always in his eyes. The light brown hair was combed neatly back from a rather high forehead.

Judged by any standards, he was a good-looking boy, who gave promise of distinguished features later in life.

His manner, usually, was quiet but confident.

Just now, however, he looked uneasy—for he knew his boss.

"Oh, it's you, Wright?" demanded the man at the desk.

"I was told that you wanted me, sir."

"Who told you that?" demanded Desmond, turning grimly on the boy.

"Mr. Prentice, sir."

"He might have put it in a different way," snapped the proprietor. "Get your memorandum book."

"I have it here, sir," Ben replied, producing the book from behind his back.

"Turn back to last Thursday."

Ben rapidly passed the pages between his hands, which shook a little, for he smelled trouble in the air.

"On that date, Wright, what order did I give you for goods to be shipped to Swezey & Newbold?"

"One hundred and eighteen cases of prime A1 Chicago canned roast beef," Ben read off, rapidly.

"Exactly," rasped his employer, picking up a letter. "And you sent down the order for corned beef!"

"Good Lord, sir—did I?" gasped the boy, startled out of his senses.

"Good Lord, did you?" mocked his employer, cuttingly. "Exactly what you did! And Swezey & Newbold



have written me in great indignation, as I should think they would. They wanted those goods for immediate handling. And now, through having gotten the wrong stuff, they've lost an important customer—and so have we! Swezey & Newbold have been trading with us to the extent of two thousand dollars a year!"

John Desmond did not speak excitedly, but in his wrath he had risen and walked straight toward the shrinking, amazed, frightened youngster.

"Well?" demanded the man, cuttingly, as he stopped short before Ben. "Have you anything to say?"

"N no, sir," stammered Ben, who, after having been white for a few moments, had now turned a fiery red.

"Wright, this has been about the thousandth blunder you have made since you've been here," rasped the employer, returning to his chair and plumping himself down in it.

"I—I know I've made a good many, sir."

"You can understand just about how valuable you are to me."

"I—I understand, sir."

"When you came here," went on the man, speaking in a somewhat milder, though no kinder, voice, "I had hopes of you. You seemed so anxious to get ahead that I believed you would work up into something. As office boy you did your work well. At the telephone switch you did fairly well, though I now remember that you made two or three blunders that it gave us some trouble to straighten out. So I gave you some minor clerical work. You did fairly well at that, though you made mistakes that gave us trouble."

"It's—it's all true, sir," stammered poor Ben, who wished that the floor under him would give way and carry him down into the cellar.

"When our old shipping clerk died, and we promoted the assistant to his position," went on Desmond, in a hard, accusing voice, "we promoted the assistant. You seemed so bright and anxious for work that we gave you the assistant's berth, and paid you the very unusual wages—for a boy of your years—of twelve dollars a week. Now, the new shipping-clerk is away on his wedding trip, and you had a chance to show what you could do in charge of the shipping department. What kind of a showing have you made?"

"Bad, I know, sir," quivered poor, crushed Ben. "But is it to be considered at all, sir, that one boy has been doing the work of two men lately, and that I have been rushed to death?"

"The principal thing that I can see," rejoined Desmond, in his coldest, most cutting voice, "is that my income has been reduced by at least twenty thousand dollars a year, unless I can find other customers to replace Swezey & Newbold, who have cut off with me—and by the great banner, I don't blame them!"

Ben's eyes suddenly snapped. He started forward eagerly.

"Mr. Desmond," he cried, appealingly, "let me get oth-

er customers for you. Let me follow out ideas of my own that I have been pondering over in the shipping department, and I can almost promise that I'll get new customers who'll be worth twice as much to you as the firm of Swezey & Newbold!"

"How?" queried his employer, but not eagerly.

"By going on the road for you, sir. Oh, I can do it! I've thought it all out while in the shipping department!"

"Send you on the road?" retorted John Desmond.

"Humph! If you got into the selling department for me, I'd be a pauper within a year! So you've been doing a lot of thinking about selling when your duties were in the shipping line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Humph! That's why you've made such a stupid ass of yourself in your new job. You've been thinking about everything but the business in hand. Wright, you're the worst and biggest blunderer that I've ever had in my employ."

"I don't doubt it, sir," Ben admitted, honestly. "But that's because I haven't been in the right place."

"Your right place? That's in a lunatic asylum!" roared John Desmond, suddenly becoming angry in spite of himself. "Boy, don't you understand what this talk leads up to?"

That gentleman walked over to a wardrobe closet, opened it, made an elaborate gesture of taking down something from a hook, and wheeled upon the boy.

"Here's your hat!" hinted Desmond, mockingly.

"Discharged?" asked Ben, soberly.

"Fired—discharged—allowed to resign! Call it anything you please," sneered his employer.

Ben drew himself up with sudden, quiet dignity.

"I'll go at once, then, sir, if you wish," he replied.

"No; you can stay until your week is up to-morrow night. You can help straighten out the work with your successor. But I shall put a good man up against you, so you won't have a chance to make too many blunders."

Desmond looked toward the door, as if inviting his young clerk to make use of it.

"Just one moment, sir," Ben begged, quietly, his face white. "Will you let me explain my new ideas about selling?"

"Don't want to hear a word," clicked Desmond, turning again to his desk.

"If you don't, sir, I'm very sure you'll be sorry later."

"Oh, bosh!" sneered the man.

"Then you won't even let me explain my plan, sir?"

"Not a word. Get out! This is my busy day. I've got to scheme ways of making up the two thousand a year that your brilliant blundering is going to cost me."

"But if you'll only hear——"

"I won't!"

"Next week will be too late, sir."

"Yes, for you won't be here. What do you think you'll do, anyway?"



"If you don't let me carry out my idea for you, Mr. Desmond, I shall take a try at it myself."

"Go into business for yourself, eh?" grinned the employer.

"Yes," Ben Wright retorted, firmly. "I guess it's the best thing, anyway. I'm tired of working for other people. I've decided not to tell you my idea, anyway, Mr. Descond. I'm going to kick over the traces and become my own boss. Remember that, sir, when you begin to hear from me in the market."

"Let me down easily, won't you?" jeered the rich man. "And now—get out!"

The command was given in a tone that was not to be misunderstood.

"May I give you just one hint, sir—about one of your employees?"

"What is it?" asked Desmond, looking up. He was always suspicious of his employees.

"I think you would do well to keep your eye on your new porter."

"An eye on Drumm? Nonsense! Richard Drumm is an honest fellow, and a good one. He came into my employ because, the other night, I was attacked by a gang of four ruffians near the Christopher Ferry. Before there was time to get a policeman Drumm pitched in and pounded the gang up so badly that he put them to flight. I found Drumm to be a poor fellow in hard luck, and at once gave him the job here."

"But he——"

"Shut up and get out!"

"But won't you listen——"

"No! Get out—on the run!"

Ben took the order literally at last. It was impossible to do anything for this man, whom he was anxious to serve faithfully up to the last.

But as Ben closed the office door, and started to cross the outer office, he started back.

Before him stood the new porter, Richard Drumm, black, wrathful, threatening.

"See here, kid, what you been telling the boss about me?" demanded Drumm, sticking an ugly jaw forward close to the boy's face.

"So you've been listening, eh?" asked Ben, quietly.

"S'posing I have? What right you got to try to queer me?"

Drumm looked as if he intended to jump on the boy.

"I don't believe I've anything to say to you, Drumm," the boy answered, coldly, and tried to pass around him.

But Drumm, wheeling, again got in his way.

"I've got a few words to say to you," insisted the porter, in a hoarse whisper. "Keep out of my way! If you don't, things'll happen."

"Rot!" snapped Ben.

"You'll take a sneak off the earth—that's all," nodded Drumm.

"So?" mocked Ben, smilingly.

"If ye get in my way again, kid, or shoot yer mouth off

about me, little old New York's streets won't be safe for ye! Savvy?"

"Got a pull with the streets?" smiled Ben, still unafraid.

"Some," mocked Drumm, in that same hoarse whisper. "Ever hear of the Hoo-hoo gang?"

Had he? The papers often contained long accounts of the doings of this gang of thugs, law-breakers, thieves. Even murders had been laid at the door of the Hoo-hoo gang.

"I pass the word, and the Hoo-hoos foller ye about town! Are ye wise now?" demanded Drumm.

"Oh, say, you make me tired!" retorted the boy, pushing by the porter and passing the next door.

But as Ben Wright crossed the great counting-room, going between the desks of all the clerks, he was mighty thoughtful.

He opened the door of the little cubby-hole of a separate office where the shipping department had its quarters.

This room he had all alone just at present.

Truth to tell, our hero, who had the one misfortune of often thinking faster than he could work, sat down at his desk, but not to go over his shipping orders.

Instead, he leaned back in a brown study.

"The Hoo-hoos, eh?" he murmured. "I wonder if Drumm really has anything to do with those thugs? His mug is tough enough to make him the leader of the gang. Oh, bosh! That was just a bluff!"

But Ben's thoughts soon took another turn.

"Why, it must have been Hoo-hoos who attacked Mr. Desmond the other night, down near the ferry. The Hoo-hoos often hang out in that neighborhood. So Drumm licked four of 'em, did he? Then it was a put-up job, and Desmond hadn't the brains to see it. Drumm made believe lick a few of his own crowd, so as to get a job here. But why did he want the job here? A fellow like Drumm, if he belongs to such a gang, wouldn't take a hard-work job unless there was a game in it. What IS the game?"

Work still forgotten, Ben Wright leaned back in his office chair, thinking hard about Porter Richard Drumm.

And Drumm, in the meantime, was doing some dark thinking in his own hard, thick head—some thinking about this very boy who blundered.

There was trouble looming up all around!

## CHAPTER II.

### "THE DRUM" ACTS QUEERLY.

A voice through the pipe from the packing department brought Ben Wright back to earth.

Then he gave a gasp, as he glanced at his littered desk and realized all that yet remained for him to do.

"I'm shiftless and worthless—a dreamer," he muttered.



"Desmond did just right to pass me my hat. I'm no good here. But I will be, from now on, up to the time I leave."

He hustled away at the papers, yet working hard to keep his mind on his task.

Ben Wright, though discharged, was much too honest a chap to meaningly slight his work during the few hours that he was to remain.

So, for an hour, he worked away, until the general scurrying of feet out in the counting-room brought it to his mind that the noon-hour had arrived.

"No lunch for me to-day," murmured the boy, though he was really hungry. "I've been loafing away Desmond's time, so I'll cut the feed and catch up with the job, like a square, white man."

Scratch! scratch! went the young clerk's pen unceasingly for the next half hour.

"Wonder if I've got this right?" murmured Ben, holding up a slip that he was making out for the packing department. "It calls for No. 1 lunch tongue—but wasn't it No. 2?"

He thought for a moment, but without getting any light on the matter.

"If I make a mistake to-day or to-morrow," muttered the boy, uneasily, "Desmond will be sure I did it on purpose because I got fired. There mustn't be any mistakes now."

John Desmond, not caring to lunch just at noon, was usually in his private office up to 1.30.

"I'll step in and ask him—that's the best way," Ben murmured, slipping down from his stool.

Through the great counting room he went, then, in the outer office beyond that of his employer he went forward softly over the carpet.

A swinging door opened into the private office.

"I wonder if the old man is too busy to see me now," Ben thought. "I'll take a peek in first, and see."

Cautiously our hero pushed the swinging door.

Then he almost shouted out with amazement.

For he saw not his employer, but Drumm, the porter.

That worthy was down on his knees before the door of the safe.

In his left hand the porter held the little memorandum book in which Desmond always kept the latest memorandum of the combination on the safe lock.

Drumm, his eyes mostly on the page of the open little book, was thoughtfully turning the knob of the combination.

"So that's what Drumm wanted to work here for!" throbbed horrified Ben. "If the boss could only see him now!"

For one thrilled, yet hesitating moment, young Wright debated whether to rush in and grapple with the detected thief.

"But that might be the worst thing to do," pondered the boy. "Drumm might grapple with me, and swear he caught me. Old Desmond would believe it, too. But I

must get someone here, to see what I am seeing—and it's got to be done in a twinkling, too!"

On tip-toes Ben Wright wheeled about.

As he did so he found himself up against what, in the first startled moment, appeared to be a big black wall.

It was the frock coat of John Desmond, who stood there looking accusingly, searchingly at the young clerk whom he had found peeping into his private office.

John Desmond now opened his lips to speak.

There was no time to caution the merchant—and Desmond must not speak and pass the alarm to Drumm!

Twist! shove! Ben fairly seized the bull by the horns.

Darting around and behind his employer like a flash, the boy gave him a monster push.

Flop! Under the impetus of that determined shove Desmond went staggering swiftly through the doorway, carrying the swinging door before him until he had passed it.

Down upon his knees went the merchant, but as he gasped and glared he found himself staring at Porter Drumm—that scoundrel also on his knees, book and combination knob in his hands.

Like a flash, and with a deep, growling oath, Drumm turned and leaped to his feet.

He was confronted by John Desmond, who, though unused to fighting, was at least anything but a coward.

"You seemed very busy, my man," said the merchant, coldly.

"I—I——" blustered the porter.

"That's quite explanation enough, thank you. My book, if you please."

For just an instant the porter hesitated, as if he would refuse and brave it out.

Then, thinking better of it, Drumm passed over the little memorandum book.

At that instant Ben Wright stepped slowly, coolly into the room.

"So this is yer job, ye stool pigeon!" bellowed Drumm, growing almost purple at sight of the boy. "You snooped, and then went off for the boss, did ye? I'll settle with ye!"

Drumm made a rush for the boy.

Bravely enough, John Desmond stepped in between the ruffian and the clerk who had served him.

But, roaring like an angry bull, Drumm fairly swept the merchant aside.

The ruffian's big and heavy fists pounded the air as he leaped forward.

But Ben was not slow.

Snatching up an office chair by its back, he swung it over his head.

"Keep off!" he warned, "or I'll brain you!"

The porter, not stopping, closed in.

Crack! Down came the chair. Drumm staved it off a bit with one of his arms, though he got a blow on the side of the head that sent him to his knees with a bleeding scalp.



Like a flash he was on his feet again, however.

Ben, as soon as he had wrecked that first chair, sprang for another, caught it up, and stood on his guard.

"Put that down, or I'll hurt ye," warned Drumm, quivering with rage.

John Desmond, with swift presence of mind, had stepped to his desk, running his finger over a row of call buttons.

Ere Drumm could spring again at our hero, quick footsteps were heard.

The door flew open, admitting half a dozen clerks who had just returned from lunch.

Then other quick steps were heard in the rooms beyond.

Drumm, caught at bay, turned, glaring at the new-comers. He saw the folly of fighting at that moment.

"You see, my man," smiled Desmond, "you may as well stop. And of course you will go—for good. Go quickly, please, as I shall be very busy this afternoon."

With a snarl, Drumm started for the door.

"He has the keys of the place," whispered Ben.

"Oh, to be sure," remembered Desmond. "One minute, Drumm. Let me have the keys, please."

Sullenly the porter returned and handed them over.

"You could be sent to prison, Drumm, I believe," went on the merchant. "I am letting you off on that, in memory of how you rushed into the gang the other night and saved me. Perhaps you did that only in order to get a job here, so that you could rob the safe. It won't pay you to come back here, Drumm, in the night-time, for the combination on the safe will be changed at once, and I shall not again be so careless as to leave my memorandum book in the desk. Mr. Prentice, see that Drumm is paid in full to the end of the week. And now I shall thank you all to leave me alone."

While the others filed out, Ben stood stock still, as if the dismissal did not apply to him.

"Oh, you are here, Wright. That reminds me that I owe you my thanks. You might tell me how you came to catch Drumm at his queer work."

This our hero did quickly.

"Perhaps I won't ask you to take your hat and go just yet, Wright," smiled the merchant. "You may remain, and try to do better in the shipping department."

"Thank you, sir, but I have already made my plans for the future," Ben replied, very quietly.

"Oh," said Desmond, but did not ask what those plans were.

Then, seeing that Ben still lingered:

"Anything else, Wright?"

"Just one thing, sir. How can you be sure that Drumm won't come back in the night and have a long try at the safe?"

"He'd have to use a jimmy to get in, and that would set off the burglar alarm. He has returned the keys to the place."

"But don't you imagine, Mr. Desmond," smiled the boy,

rather scornfully, "that a scoundrel like Drumm would be smart enough to have duplicate keys made while he has had a set in his possession?"

Desmond started.

"That's so," he murmured.

"The afternoon is early," hinted Ben. "By night you can have new locks on everything if you hustle. Then a set of the old keys would be good for nothing but scrap metal."

Desmond looked at the boy, half admiringly.

"Wright, do you know, all of a sudden, from failing to do enough thinking, you're beginning to think of everything? By Jove, I'm not so sure that I want you to take your hat and go. Better remain on here."

"Thank you, Mr. Desmond, but you discharged me this morning, and so I began to make my plans at once. I don't care to remain."

"You don't wholly approve of your boss, eh?"

"Perhaps not, sir."

"Oh! Well, what's the matter with me, boy?"

"Do you really want me to tell you, sir?" asked Ben, finding that the merchant was looking very steadily at him.

"If you please," nodded Desmond.

"Well, then," came the prompt answer, "you're not quite enough up to date for me."

"Oh!" and John Desmond looked rather astonished. "Well, in what respect am I behind the times?"

"For one thing," Ben went on, coolly, "I offered to explain to you a method of greatly increasing your business."

"Oh, sit down! I'm ready to listen," rejoined Desmond, who seemed suddenly to be in a better humor than he had been in the morning.

"But I'm not ready to talk now, sir," came the young clerk's answer. "As you turned down my scheme without even listening, I feel that I don't owe the idea to you any longer."

"Going to take the idea to a rival, eh?" asked Desmond, looking half amused.

"Not quite," Ben smiled. "I'm going into business with that idea for myself."

"Oh! Well, I wish you luck, Wright."

"You haven't forgotten about the locksmith, have you, sir?" queried Ben, changing the subject.

"Oh, no. You might go to my locksmith, Wright. You know where his place is. Tell him what we want, and rush him around here. Tell him the job has to be done by six o'clock to-night."

Ben made quick time out to the street, dodging three or four clerks in the counting-room who wanted to ask questions.

Out in the busy street he hurried along, until a figure big and brutal loomed up before him.

"So ye spoiled it, eh?" snarled Drumm, his face as black as a thunder cloud.

"I've no time to talk with your kind," Ben rejoined, stiffly. "Get out of the way, please."



"Get out of the way, is it?" leered the ex-porter, roughly. "It's in yer way I'll get, kid. Ye spoiled a job for me and for the gang. That settles you! The Hoo-hoos'll have yer life, kid, before they're through with ye! Take my word for it."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't take your word for anything," sneered Wright.

"Oh, ye wouldn't, eh? Then take my word for a broken leg!"

Drumm jumped forward suddenly, aiming a kick with all his might for Ben's nearer knee.

Had he given no warning he would have broken the youngster's leg beyond a doubt.

But Ben, cautioned, darted aside.

The kick landed, but glancingly.

Like a flash Drumm turned and darted around the nearest corner.

"Oh, bother him!" decided Ben, after wondering for an instant whether to yell for a policeman and give chase.

A few curious passers-by stopped, crowding about the boy, who was rubbing a knee that had narrowly escaped breaking.

"It's me for the locksmith—that's my job," quivered the boy.

Breaking through those who hemmed him in, he hurried onward, limping slightly.

"Drumm showed his good intentions all right," muttered the boy, wincing with the pain in his knee. He'll sure do his best to lay me up! But I wonder if he really belongs to the Hoo-hoos? They don't balk at murder jobs."

Richard Drumm really did belong to the Hoo-hoos.

In that interesting gang he was known as "The Drum," on account of the beatings he could take without a murmur.

And The Drum generally led the Hoo-hoo processions of crime!

### CHAPTER III.

#### IN THE HOO-HOO RUSH.

"It must be closing time," muttered Ben Wright, looking up from his desk toward the clock. "Thunder! It is!"

Busily at work all afternoon, trying to catch up with his duties, Ben had given no thought to the flight of time until the moving of feet in the counting-room outside told him that the clerks were leaving for the day.

"I wish I had an hour more," sighed the boy. "The new man will be in in the morning, and I won't have things in shape for him to break in."

Dropping his pen, our hero hurried to the private office. Desmond was at his desk, busily engaged.

"Well, Wright?" he demanded, looking up.

"You look as if you were not going right away, sir." "I'm not."

"Then can I stay longer? I've got a lot I want to do with my work."

"Want to stay overtime, eh?" asked the merchant, looking surprised.

"Why, yes; when I leave to-morrow I want to leave things straight behind me."

"How long do you want to stay?"

"As long as you do, sir."

"But I expect to be here until ten o'clock."

"So much the better for my work."

"Go ahead, then," replied the merchant, briefly.

But he muttered to himself, as Ben hurried away:

"I'm afraid I've been hasty with that boy. There's more in him than I thought."

Ben, at his desk, with the light turned on, was still busy at work when Desmond looked in on him at eight o'clock.

"Young man, do you mind stopping long enough to go out and get some sandwiches and fruit for me?"

"Of course I don't," Ben replied, slipping down from his stool. "And I'll get something for myself. I haven't eaten since this morning."

Our hero hurried into the street, taking a set of the new keys along with him.

There were few passers-by now, on this downtown business street.

But just across the street, a few doors up, Wright caught sight of a figure that made his flesh creep.

"That's Drumm!" he panted, and started to run.

He did not care to meet that bully alone if it could be helped.

"What's he laying around there for now?" Ben throbbed, as he got away from the Drum's neighborhood. "What does he expect to do? And—Jerusha! When I get back he'll sure jump me. I might stand that, but I don't want him to get the new set of keys away from me!"

Around the corner young Wright bought sandwiches and fruit enough for his employer and himself.

Then he started back, throbbing with alertness.

A big, blue-clad form loomed up at the corner—a policeman.

"Just the man I want to see," greeted Ben. "See here, I'm employed at a place down the street where a man was fired to-day. He's laying for me and for the boss. He's a fellow named Drumm, and brags that he belongs to the Hoo-hoo gang."

"Does, eh?" demanded the policeman, looking interested.

"He'll be laying for me when I go back," Ben went on, hurriedly. "Will you walk down to Desmond's office with me?"

"I won't," replied the copper, promptly. "But I'll trail along behind you in the shadow. If Mr. Hoo-hoo Drumm shows up I'll try to jump him the second he produces trouble. Walk along, kid, and remember I'm not far away!"



"Now, that's all right—sure!" glowed the boy, as he stepped forward. "Drumm, I hope you do show your face!"

But that fellow didn't. Ben reached the door, and turned in in safety, closing the door and locking it behind him.

"Drumm has been laying around outside," our hero announced, when he reached his employer's office.

"That so?"

Desmond looked a bit worried.

"Wonder what the rascal's up to? And just the night when I am to leave the office with funds about me."

"Are you?" Ben gasped. "Does Drumm know it?"

"I'm afraid he must, Wright. I sent him to the bank this morning, as a guard for Prentice, who drew out eight thousand dollars in cash for me. I'm going over to Jersey late to-night, and take the money with me."

"And Drumm knows it!"

"Does look so, doesn't it?" smiled the merchant.

"Then you'll take me to the ferry with you, won't you?" our hero pleaded. "The fellow wouldn't dare attack two people, where he wouldn't hesitate to jump on one."

"I'll see about it, Wright, if you're here at the time I leave."

"I shan't think of leaving until you go, Mr. Desmond."

Back at his own desk in the other office, Ben ate his own meal, then buckled down hard to work.

There he sat until the merchant looked in.

"Nearly ten o'clock, young man," announced the merchant, who had buttoned up his long frock coat and had his high silk hat on.

"Going now, sir?"

"Yes."

"Got all that money about you?"

"In here," nodded Desmond, tapping the breast of his coat.

"I'll be ready in a jiffy."

Ben's own books and papers were quickly stored in the safe behind his desk.

"Want some good advice, Mr. Desmond?" he asked as he locked the safe.

"What is it?"

"Let me telephone police headquarters and have a policeman sent here to escort you to the ferry."

"Oh, I guess I'm not as nervous as I was," laughed the merchant. "I don't believe Drumm would dare attack me on the way to the ferry."

"Any chance that is needless is a foolish one to take, sir," hinted the young clerk.

"Oh, there can't be any risk," objected Desmond.

"At least, I can walk to the ferry with you," proposed Ben.

"I don't want you doing anything of the sort, lad. I'm not afraid."

"But you'll let me go with you, won't you?"

"I won't hear of it."

Desmond's lips closed with a snap that showed the uselessness of argument.

So, at the sidewalk, Ben locked the door and handed the keys over to his employer.

"Good-by, Wright, and thank you for all you've done for me to-day," acknowledged the merchant. "I shall be in to-morrow afternoon, and I shan't forget you."

"Let me walk down to the ferry with you," pleaded the boy.

"Don't you dare!"

So Ben, with a muttered good-night, turned in the opposite direction.

A few doors above, however, he stopped, looking back down the street.

"I won't let him go alone," muttered the boy, and went on stealthily after the man who had discharged him and been sorry for it.

Down through the turnings of Christopher street Desmond was soon walking on that warm May night.

He looked neither to the right nor left, but walked on through and past the men and women on the sidewalk, only now and then pausing to avoid trampling on the swarms of small children that played about.

"Say, mister, ain't ye lost?" piped a small, shrill voice.

Other youngsters laughed as they stared at the big, broad-shouldered, well dressed figure.

Through such throngs as were out on Christopher street on a night like this Ben could follow with little danger of detection by his employer.

Both got at last down nearer to the ferry, where the crowds of dwellers became thinner.

"That bloke with the silk man-hole cover's likely to get into trouble down this way," Ben heard a hard-faced girl say to the other girl who was standing with her. "He looks like meat for the Hoo-hoos."

"Huh! Hain't none of the Hoo-hoos been heard of down this way lately," answered the other girl.

"Hain't, eh? There's always a Hoo-hoo around when there's dough in the pan. That old geezer must have a watch and wad, if nothin' more. If he has, bet ye three to one he loses."

And now, much nearer to the ferry, the crowd on the street was growing much scantier.

Many eyes followed the big, prosperous-looking figure of the merchant. Those who were not in crime for themselves wondered whether Desmond would reach the ferry through a neighborhood that the Hoo-hoo gang had made famous in the wrong way.

Two men came out of a doorway, and began to follow close at the heels of John Desmond.

They were rough-looking young fellows, yet there was nothing really suspicious in their movements.

But Ben Wright, watchfully alert, drew closer, trembling a little inwardly.

"Are they Hoo-hoos?" he throbbed, as he looked straight ahead. "That gang has a reputation for hating



any wealthy man. They always more'n half kill the rich man they tackle!"

Thin, indeed, was the size of the crowd at this point.

John Desmond still strode on, as if unaware that he was being followed.

Out of a saloon came two more men. They fell in behind the first pair.

"Gracious!"

Now Ben Wright sprang forward at a leap.

He had just caught sight of The Drum, sneaking softly out of a doorway.

Like a cat, The Drum passed the other four men, going ahead of them and close behind the merchant.

"Duck for your life, Mr. Desmond!" roared Ben.

Out in the street, almost over to the other sidewalk, Ben was running at top speed.

As he raced, out of the corners of his eyes he saw a dozen more men joining the first-comers.

At sound of the voice Mr. Desmond halted, wheeling about like a flash.

His cold eyes looked into those of The Drum.

That worthy, hardly at arm's-length, suddenly dropped a blackjack down out of his sleeve into his red, brawny right hand.

"Hand over!" sneered the ex-porter.

"Come and get it!" jeered Desmond, coolly, standing on guard with both fists clenched.

"Oh, I'll do you, if ye don't hand over! See the gang behind me?"

"A hungry-looking lot," smiled Desmond, his face pale, but his grit away up.

"Then here goes for the soak!" growled Drumm, bouncing forward, with right arm uplifted.

"No, you don't, you brute!" roared Ben, darting forward.

"We'll do you, too!" roared The Drum, as Ben jumped in to save his employer. "Pile in, fellers, and kill 'em—the plunder's worth it!"

Crack! The Drum made a lunge forward to brain his former employer.

But he had two enemies to face. That crack came from Ben's right fist, which landed squarely over the brute's right eye.

Down went The Drum, but the whole Hoo-hoo gang rallied and charged—a swarming avalanche of human greed and hate!

Ben turned to face the first-comer.

Biff! Down went that rascal.

Smash! Desmond didn't know how to run away in a crash like that. His fist caught a fellow under the jaw.

The merchant's lusty blow landed the fellow, head-first, through the plate glass of a saloon.

"Down 'em! Kill 'em both!" roared The Drum, leaping to his feet.

The Hoo-hoos came on, now—a solid fighting front.

It would have been folly to try to run.

Panting, side by side, employer and clerk backed to a wall.

Here both used their fists as fast as they could.

"Police!"

"Help!"

Both shouted, while fighting desperately to defend themselves from death.

Three more of the gang went down before that pair of fists.

But The Drum, hurling two lighter ruffians aside, broke through the front.

Swat! He aimed at the merchant, but Ben ducked in under that raised arm.

Under the force of The Drum's blow, Wright went down to the sidewalk.

Trip! Ben made the best use of his fall by grabbing the ankles of The Drum.

Flop! The leader of the Hoo-hoos sat down with a force that made the sidewalk shake.

Not for nothing was the ex-porter named The Drum. He could take his beating.

Jarred by Ben's trip, but his fighting courage not a bit cooled, The Drum reached forward with his fist.

Ben dodged that fist, only to run afoul of the slung-shot.

The heavy, loaded end crossed Ben's jugular, laying the boy out flat.

"Police! Help!" shouted Desmond.

He was still fighting with the force and valor of three men.

But The Drum was once more on his feet.

More than that, Ben Wright, half-dazed and badly hurt, simply could not rise at that instant.

Thump! thump! whack! Desmond was in the thick of it now, fighting for his very life.

"We've got to kill the geezer quick!" growled The Drum. "Let me at him!"

Bink! That was what the slungshot sounded like, as it landed glancingly against the side of the merchant's head.

Down went Desmond, the last of the fight out of him.

"Now he'll give up!" chuckled The Drum, roughly, as he knelt on his victim's chest.

Rip! Tear! Slash!

The gang were aiding The Drum to tear away Desmond's clothing.

Gasping, Ben sat quickly up, wondering if it would be possible to get in a crack that would count.

Biff! From behind a brawny fist caught him in the back of the head.

Ben pitched forward to his knees, seeing more stars than there were in the sky above.

"Kill that kid!" gruffed a voice. "He's living too long!"

"Come on, fellers!" rumbled the Drum's exultant voice. "I've got the boodle."

Crack! Another blow stretched Ben Wright flat.



## CHAPTER IV.

## THE FURY OF THE GANG.

"Cheese it! A cop!"

"Kill de cop, then!"

Whiz! A shower of stones descended, aimed at the breast of a lone policeman running up.

But that policeman knew how to meet a ferry gang.

Into a doorway he darted, then out again just as the stones had fallen.

Flash! The street light shone on that policeman's revolver.

"I'll kill the man that throws a stone!" roared the officer.

Whiz! The stone came, but the cop dodged.

Crack! It was a shot from a police pistol, but the stone-thrower had no chance to dodge.

He went down, yelling, a bullet through his right shoulder.

In the meantime, Ben Wright was doing valiant duty—just how good it was he did not know at the moment.

As he fell, his hands had grappled with a pair of ankles beating it past him.

Bump! He had brought down his man.

Nor did the man stir, more than to quiver in pain.

For that ruffian had landed on his forehead, the fall doing him pretty well up.

Now, as Ben, still gripping his enemy's ankles, realized that a shooting policeman was at hand, looked up to see how the fight was going, his gaze fell on the form of his prostrate victim.

"The Drum!" he throbbed, joyously.

That was who it was.

Like a flash Ben fell upon his helpless adversary.

Under him prowled Ben's hands.

Sure enough, there, under The Drum's breast, was the broad, heavy Manila envelope that contained the eight thousand dollars.

Jerk! Ben had it away in a twinkling, thrusting the envelope into his own inner coat pocket.

"Here's the worst one!" cried Ben, leaping up as the officer landed beside him.

The gang had fled, all except their fallen leader, for all around the neighborhood sharp raps had rung out—raps made by the night-sticks of other policemen responding to the call for help.

"Got him!" clicked the cop, kneeling on The Drum.

"He got my——" began Desmond, excitedly, but Ben boldly clapped a hand over his employer's mouth—a move that the police officer did not see.

"Sh!" whispered Ben, taking his hand away.

"Eh?" gasped the bewildered Desmond.

"He hasn't got your money."

"Where——"

"I've got it," Ben nodded, exultantly.

"You——"

"Keep quiet!"

"Hand it to me."

"Not with anyone to see."

"What do you——"

"Hush! Keep cool, Mr. Demond. Into the doorway. There you are!"

Dragging his employer into a doorway, Ben swiftly passed the envelope.

"Don't tell anyone The Drum got it away from you," warned the boy.

"Why not?"

"If you do, the police will hold the money as part of the evidence. Keep the money, and let the police just think that the Drum tried for it. That'll be enough to jail him, and you won't have to leave the money at the station-house."

"Wright, you're becoming a genius!" cried his employer, admiringly. "I understand! If I said that fellow had once got the money away from me I wouldn't be able to take the money with me to-night."

"You may not, anyway," smiled Ben, looking at Desmond's tattered clothing. "There! They've got our man."

The first policeman, aided by a second who had run up, had succeeded in handcuffing the ex-porter, who was no longer in condition to put up a fight.

Two more policemen were scouring the street ahead in quest of other Hoo-hoos.

But these rascals, having slipped into the nearest saloons, and mingled with the crowds there, could no longer be recognized.

"Would you know any of the crowd?" asked a policeman, turning to our hero.

"Couldn't swear to any of 'em," Ben replied.

"But you'll swear to this fellow?"

"You've got his slungshot," retorted Ben. "That ought to be goods enough to locate on any Hoo-hoo. And we know him—Mr. Desmond and I. That fellow's name is Drumm. He was Mr. Desmond's porter until to-day."

"Fired?" demanded the cop, with interest.

"Just!" clicked Ben.

"And soaked the boss to get square, eh?"

"A heap like it," nodded Ben.

"And robbery, too, I suppose," pursued the policeman. "Did he get anything away from you, sir?"

"You didn't find any goods on the crook, did you?" broke in Ben, talking for his employer.

"I had a good deal of money about me, and the fellow knew it," added John Desmond, coolly. "But I've got all of the money yet."

The Drum still lay on the sidewalk. He was conscious, but knew enough not to talk.

Up came the patrol wagon. Prisoner and witnesses were loaded in.

Clang! The wagon was started away from a neighborhood where not even policemen were always safe.



"Duck!" yelled one of the policemen.

Whizz! From a roof at the left a volley of stones descended.

But the only one hit was the Drum, who sat bolstered up between two policemen.

"You lobsters!" roared the prisoner. "Can't ye throw straight?"

The patrol wagon raced around the corner, all the occupants of the hurry-up wagon breathing more easily.

"This is my first ride in a wagon of this kind," uttered John Desmond, disgustedly.

"That's not to your discredit," smiled the boy.

The horses traveling at a gallop, it did not take long to reach the nearest police station.

Without any gentleness the policemen hustled their still half-dazed captive from the wagon and dragged him up the steps.

"Dey've pinched De Drum!" Ben heard come from someone in the small crowd that had gathered at the foot of the station-house steps.

"It'll be a cop or two to de dead-house, den—see if it ain't!" hinted another subdued voice. "De Hoo-hoos won't give up deir 'cap' widout some trouble!"

"Dem's de geezers dat had De Drum slugged," was the last Ben heard as he and Desmond followed the police party up the steps.

Propped up by two policemen, the Drum stood at the rail before the sergeant's desk while Mr. Desmond made the charge.

Then The Drum was carried off below, and a police surgeon called to dress what looked to be a fractured skull resulting from Ben's last trip.

"Lucky the crook didn't get your money away from you, or we'd have to hold it as evidence," grinned the sergeant. "If you want, Mr. Desmond, you can go across the hall into the captain's office to wait until fresh clothing reaches you."

Thanking the sergeant heartily, Mr. Desmond took advantage of the offer, he and Ben seating themselves in two comfortable arm-chairs.

A messenger was summoned, and sent for a change of clothing for the merchant.

Ben had suffered more in his bones and less in his clothes.

"I need this money for use the first thing in the morning," explained the merchant, tapping his heavy envelope. "But fortunately I have other cash with me."

He took out a purse that had escaped The Drum's sharp eyes.

From this he took out five fifty-dollar bills, and extended them toward the boy.

"For me?" asked Ben.

"Why not?" smiled his employer. "It was worth it—to me."

"I wasn't thinking of any reward," protested Wright.

"No; but you earned it, so it is all right. It's worth a

decent little penny, anyway, to jump in and risk your life before a crowd like that."

"I'd like the money well enough, of course," hesitated Ben.

"Then take it. You've earned it. You'd be a fool not to take it."

"You really think so?"

"Of course I do."

"Then I'll take it, and thank you."

"Now, Wright, I want you to forget our few words this morning," went on the merchant, smilingly. "I thought you no good, and of no use to me. But I've found out differently. I want you to stay with me, and I'll give you something better, too, in the way of a job, as soon as I can find it."

But at this Ben shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but it's too late, Mr. Desmond."

"What do you mean, boy?"

"Just what I told you to-day, sir. I've made my plans for the near future."

"Then unmake them!"

"I wouldn't do that, sir, for a good deal."

John Desmond stared curiously at his young and lately-despised clerk.

"What is this idea of yours, Wright?" he asked, bluntly.

"I'm going into business for myself."

"What line of business?"

"Same as yours, sir."

"To be your own proprietor? Surely not!"

"Surely, yes!" smiled Ben.

"But what capital have you got for a game like that?"

"Well, this money, for one thing," laughed young Wright, holding up the money he had just received.

"Boy, you can't do any business on a capital like that!" cried John Desmond, who now realized that his clerk was in thorough earnest.

"Can't I?" smiled Ben. "I'm eager to prove that I can. And besides, I've got other money."

"What other money?"

"About ninety dollars that I've saved."

"A little over three hundred dollars? Pooh!"

"That's more than the first Astor, Gould, or Vanderbilt had at one time," laughed Ben, contentedly.

"That's true," nodded Desmond, thoughtfully. "But do you think you belong in their class?"

"Not now, of course. But I may, after a while."

"If you're going into my line of business, Wright," urged the man, "you'd better stay with me a while, and learn more of the tricks of the trade."

"I believe I've got a new trick now, that'll work better than some of the old ones."

"Tell me about it, Wright."

"Tell a business rival?" laughed the boy. "That would be stupid of me, wouldn't it?"

"Oh! Then we're to be rivals?" smiled the merchant.

"Sure thing! Hadn't I better give this money back to you before it's spent in getting business away from you?"



"Oh, no. Keep it," smiled the merchant. "But I hope, Wright, that when you get me in a tight corner, you'll be as easy on me as you can."

"As easy on you as I can," Ben laughingly promised. "But remember that I shall have to live, Mr. Desmond."

"And, hang it all," nodded the merchant, "I begin to believe that you will live."

"I shall try."

"Do you live at home, Wright?"

"I haven't any home to live in," the boy murmured, sadly.

"Oh! An orphan?"

"Father died four years ago. Mother died two years ago."

"Where on earth do you live?"

"In a part of the earth known as West Nineteenth Street," smiled Ben. "A fellow named Steve Dorsey lives with me. We have a sky parlor that we pay three dollars a week for. We get our own grub. Sometimes we fix something in the room, and sometimes we get the grub outside."

"And you've managed to save money, you say?"

"Some, but not much. A fellow has to dress decently in business, you know."

"By the way——"

Pausing, Desmond handed the boy twenty-five dollars more.

"What's this for?"

"To buy another suit with. That won't look fit for business after this. The Hoo-hoos took too good care of that."

After a protest, Ben also pocketed this money.

"Here are my other duds," announced Desmond, as the door opened.

"I'll wait in the other office for you," nodded the boy, slipping out.

Within five minutes John Desmond appeared, looking as if he had not lately been through a desperate fight for his life.

"You'd better take a cab to the ferry—and take another ferry, too," advised the sergeant.

"Good advice," nodded the merchant.

"And this time you'll agree to my going through to the ferry with you, won't you, sir?" Ben queried.

"I—I think I'd better take your advice, young man. I'm growing to have more and more respect for your judgment every hour."

A policeman called the cab.

Outside of the station-house the crowd that had been there had vanished.

The start was made quietly, but it was too good to last. Swiftly the cab was driven across town.

Then, while still a few blocks away from the Twenty-third street ferry, there was a smashing of glass.

"Squeeze up against the back of the seat!" cried Ben.

Not less than a dozen stones came in through the shattered windows.

One of them struck the boy's leg close to the knee.

"Ugh!" gasped Wright.

"Hurt, my boy?" came the merchant's query, in a kindly tone.

"Not more'n I can stand, sir."

Crash! Another shower of rocks from the head of another alley way.

But this time only two of the missiles entered the cab, neither doing any harm.

"Got De Drum pinched, did ye?"

"Oh, you geezers is marked for de dead-house—remember dat!"

Then the driver, whipping his horses to a gallop, soon drew up under the broad glare of electric lights at the ferry.

But Ben insisted on going with his employer as far as the latter's train on the Jersey side.

Then our hero returned—going across Twenty-third street, under bright light, and so home to his lodgings, where he woke up Steve Dorsey to tell that youth some wonderful things.

## CHAPTER V.

THERE ARE SOME "FOOLS" WHO HAVE LUCK.

"Got 'em nailed—twenty-two more on this trip—and each good for two wagon-loads a week!" chuckled Steve Dorsey, as he burst into the office.

It was Ben's office, by the way.

For this was five weeks later, and Ben's new idea was flourishing.

He was down in the wholesale provision district on Fourteenth street, not very far from the North River.

It was not so much of an office to look at, but there was business being transacted there.

And a simple enough idea it had proved, as far as it had gone.

For years the New Jersey farmers who sell shiploads of farm produce in the markets of New York had been gouged by the "commission men" through whom they sold their wares.

These selling agents in New York were supposed to sell farm produce on a definite basis of commission.

That is to say, the commission men sold farm produce to wholesale dealers at the highest prices they could get, keeping out a certain commission on the amounts realized from these sales and turning over the balance of the money to the farmers whose goods they sold.

This was an honest enough proposition—if it had been honestly carried out.

But for years the commission men, forming a clique of their own, had been systematically robbing the poor farmers.

Instead of a straight commission, honestly earned, these selling agents had managed to trump all sorts of "charges" against the farmers who depended upon them.



Thus, instead of small commissions, the bonuses charged by these selling agents took up most of the farmer's profits.

In addition, the farmer was usually kept waiting a long time for his money.

The profit had gone out of farming for many a Jerseyman.

Yet such a man could find no relief by changing his commission man.

Nearly all of these New York agents were leagued together, so that the farmer who changed his commission man fared no better.

But Ben had come forward with hardly more capital than would furnish his office scantily, and pay the rent for a while.

His idea had been to sell the farmer's produce on a straight basis of ten per cent commission.

His books and accounts were open at all times to farmers who sold through him. They could discover just how much he was getting for their produce, and could see for themselves that they were actually getting their full ninety per cent of the proceeds.

More than that, Ben sold all goods on a strict basis of ten day's cash. As every buyer from him had to settle within ten days, the farmers were no longer kept waiting for their cash.

The scheme had caught on with amazing promptness.

The first few farmers who trusted their business in Ben's young but hustling hands were quick to discover that they were actually getting their money.

Then other farmers flocked to this new and "square" commission man, who did not belong to any "ring," and did not need to.

In five weeks' time Ben was handling nearly fifty per cent of the Jersey produce that came over the Twenty-third street ferry.

He had the first pick, and the best pick, of vegetables and fruits.

Wholesalers were obliged to come to him, for the simple reason that they could not fill their orders without buying of this new young financier.

But this was not the whole of young Ben Wright's idea. He was planning, also, to break into the canned goods market, and here he was likely to conflict with his old employer, John Desmond.

"Nowadays it's might easy to pick up Jersey farmers, and add 'em to our list," laughed Steve, as he sank into the armchair opposite Ben's smart, new-looking roll-top desk.

"Of course it's easy to get 'em," nodded Ben, with enthusiasm. "Our idea is wholly new—we use the farmer square."

"I don't have to go looking for 'em now," Steve continued. "Just drop into a town, go to the little hotel, and drop a hint about my business. Before the day is over all the farmers in town have come in to look me up. Here are the twenty-two agreements I picked up on this trio."

Steve laid the papers down on our hero's desk.

"That'll make some more profits," smiled Wright. "Your salary may as well go up five a week, Steve. The business will stand it."

"Thirty dollars a week? Whew!" gasped Steve, happily.

"Well, I can afford to be honest with you, as well as with the farmers," nodded Ben. "I'm making my money through the new-fangled idea of being strictly honest in business."

"It's a winner—sure," said Steve. "It's a wonder nobody ever thought of it before."

"Being honest is such a brand-new idea in business, you see!" grinned young Wright.

Steve was the Jersey representative of this new house of Wright.

It was his business to go among the farmers and drum up new trade.

Nor was it in any way hard, now that Ben had made a good start, and had proved his claim of being honest.

Of course, the commission men, finding their business dwindling, had tried in all sorts of ways to get their trade back.

They had lied about Ben, but that did little good, for the farmers were satisfied.

Many of the hard-hit commission men had even tried the scheme of turning over a new leaf and being honest—but not even that worked.

Very wisely farmers who had dealt through the Wright office refused to go back to older commission men, who had suddenly and suspiciously offered to turn honest.

It wasn't extremely pleasant for our hero to walk down that section of Fourteenth street.

Everywhere he met commission men who had suffered through his new methods, and they hated him cordially.

"When are you going to reach out for the canned goods trade?" Steve inquired.

"I'm reaching already," Ben smiled, mysteriously.

"Got any stock in?"

"Some."

"Going to get more?"

"As soon as I've worked up the customers to knowing about my trick."

The canned goods game, in brief, was this:

Many of Desmond's customers could not, or did not, order until the last moment. Then they wanted their supplies in a rush.

This was especially true of wholesale dealers who supplied summer hotels.

The hotels could not be sure of their demands until they saw how the summer people were coming to them.

A hot wave, a rush to the summer hotels, and the proprietors clamored to the wholesalers for prompt, rush supplies of canned goods.

The wholesalers fell back on the house of Desmond.

But John Desmond conducted his business in an old-fashioned way, never buying goods from the West much faster than he seemed likely to need them.



Hence, the wholesalers who wanted orders rushed were often indignant at Desmond's inability to supply goods on the same day.

Our hero, from his work in the Desmond shipping office, knew just who these customers were, and their business was a big one, worth going after.

"I've sent out circulars," Ben explained. "All of Desmond's rush wholesalers know now that they can look to me for goods shipped on the same day."

"And you haven't got the goods to ship if an order does come in!" gasped Steve.

"How do you know that I haven't?"

"Have you?"

"At any time to-day, Steve, I can order to the freight yards thirty thousand dollars' worth of canned meats."

"You've bought 'em, then?"

"In a way," the young business boy explained. "I've bought 'em, yes—that is, I've ordered the goods, and I've paid a five-per-cent deposit down. That took fifteen hundred dollars, and it holds twenty times that amount of goods ready for my order."

"But if you don't sell 'em, you're out!" argued Steve.

"I'd be out my profit, yes; but I'm just about dead sure, at the worst, of being able to sell at cost, in any kind of a market."

"I don't quite know how that scheme will work," said Steve, dubiously.

The desk telephone rang sharply. Ben took up the receiver, holding it to his ear.

"Hullo! Who's that? Oh, John Desmond? How do you do, Mr. Desmond?"

Steve, full of curiosity, hitched his chair close to the instrument, so that he could hear what was coming in over the wire.

"Wright," sounded the older merchant's voice, "I hear that you're laying up some canned goods against bad weather."

"Yes, I have some," Ben smiled.

"Ready for spot delivery?"

"I can move them all to-day."

"What have you got, and where are they?"

"Isn't that a rather large question, Mr. Desmond? The goods are in New York city. Tell me what you want, and I'll tell you if I can supply you."

Desmond read off the list of a large order.

Then Ben read off his list of what he had.

"I think I can make those goods do, if the price is right," Desmond replied, over the wire. "What is the price?"

Ben quoted the figures to him.

"Why, you young rascal," shouted his one-time employer's most rasping voice, "that's just what I get for the goods."

"I know it," Ben admitted, coolly. "But you see I have to get that price, too."

"Then what do I make, if I buy of you?"

"You make your customer satisfied, and save him for a while," Ben laughed.

"But you must shave some on that price to me, young man."

"I couldn't hardly do that," Ben protested. "You see, Mr. Desmond, if you can't fill your rush order, your customer will have to come to me, anyway, and I'll make just the same profit that I'm asking of you."

"But my customer never heard of you, Wright."

"You're wrong there, Mr. Desmond. You forget that I used to be your shipping clerk, and that I know the names of all your people."

"You young rascal!" shouted John Desmond.

"That isn't rascality, sir—it's business. I'm trying to get all I can out of it, too."

"But you must shave some on that price to me, young so that I can make a little profit on my own order."

"Why, Mr. Desmond, your profit will come through your ability to please your customer, and keep him for future business—if you can."

"What's your lowest price, Wright? It's time to stop nonsense, for I'm busy to-day," sounded the irritated voice of John Desmond.

"My lowest price was the one I gave you a few moments ago."

"Oh, well," sounded the merchant's annoyed voice, "send me the goods, then."

"And, Mr. Desmond?"

"Well?"

"Would it be too much trouble to send me the certified check? I need the money to-day in another little transaction."

"Check will reach you in an hour, you scoundrel! And, Wright!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You're a very clever scoundrel to boot."

"How is that, sir?"

"Why, you've used me rather roughly, without making me angry. I congratulate you. You'll get along all right in business, I think."

"Thank you, sir. I shall try to."

As the bell rang off, and Ben hung up the receiver, he burst into a gleeful laugh.

"There are some fools who have luck, eh, Steve?"

"How much did you make on that little scheme?" asked Dorsey, curiously.

"Guess."

"Five hundred?" asked Steve, doubtfully.

"Eighteen hundred!"

Steve Dorsey fairly gasped.

"You won't need to work much longer, Ben!"

"Oh, a little while yet," our hero retorted, coolly. "My bank account ought to show about eight thousand dollars now—but that's a long way from being rich."

"Whew! I almost shudder to think what you'll be worth in a year from now," grimaced Dorsey.



"My bank account may be smaller by this time next week," Wright suggested lightly.

"What in blazes can do that?"

"How do you think Desmond feels just now?"

"Pinched! Squeezed!"

"Just so," Ben nodded, smilingly. "And he'll immediately sit down to figure out how to pinch and squeeze me. He isn't the kind of a man to take a licking. He'll scheme to get me in a tight place and make me sweat blood."

"Then don't speculate, Ben."

"I've got to, I'm afraid," sighed our hero. "Really, old boy, the game of business isn't worth much when you don't speculate a trifle."

"If you do, Desmond, with all his cash, will pinch you hard yet."

"I'm going to give him a chance."

"Don't—you idiot!" protested Dorsey, his face showing real concern now.

"Oh, I've got to, I tell you. See here, Steve, they're talking about ordering the army and navy maneuvers at Old Point Comfort."

"Supposing they are?"

"Well, the army and navy may have most of their provisions, but the militia, who'll be ordered out, too, won't have. Then there'll be thousands of people go down to see the fun. The militia and the hotel people will want canned meats and vegetables to beat the band."

"And you're going to get long on the goods?"

"Just that! And before the maneuvers are definitely decided on. Any fool can order after the maneuvers are decided on. I am going to stake my whole pile on buying up ahead with five-per-cent down."

"But if the government doesn't order the maneuvers?" Steve asked.

"Then I'll probably drop my whole pile and have to start to get another."

"Don't do it, Ben," begged Dorsey. "Be satisfied with the way you are making money. Don't stand to lose everything."

"But I stand to win everything, too."

"I don't like it," declared Dorsey, shaking his head.

"I do. I can't keep away from it."

"Have your own way, then."

"I'm going to. Steve, in the morning I'll give you your full orders. You'll go out and buy cautiously against next week's delivery in New York. By the time the maneuver news comes out I want to control a big slice of the canned goods coming into New York. See here. Here are the people for you to go to and buy of."

Ben Wright picked up pencil and paper and began to jot down the names of selling firms.

Steve followed until his head buzzed.

But Ben at last looked up.

"Five o'clock! I never work overtime. See you here in the morning at eight o'clock, old chap."

The friends no longer lived together. Steve had moved

to a better grade of boarding-house. Our hero lived at the St. Denis Hotel on Broadway.

For a few moments Wright lingered in the office outside, giving parting instructions to the bookkeeper and four clerks there.

Steve had gone by the time that our hero prepared to leave.

In all the whirl and excitement of the new life the new young financier had all but forgotten the Hoo-hoos.

True, The Drum had been indicted by the Grand Jury, and was now awaiting trial before the fall term of court.

Unable to get out on bail, The Drum was wearily passing his time in jail.

His own friends did not dare to visit him.

John Desmond had made such a clamor that the police were engaged in earnest in running down the Hoo-hoos.

Anyone attempting to visit The Drum would have been arrested on general suspicion.

Knowing this, the Hoo-hoos kept away from their unfortunate comrade.

Yet they had not forgotten.

Three or four threatening letters had reached our hero during the first week after The Drum's arrest.

Then nothing more was heard.

The police said confidently that the gang, taking the alarm, had fled to other cities.

But on this point, as on others, Ben Wright was destined to receive further information.

## CHAPTER VI.

### IN BEAUTY'S SERVICE.

Ben, passing through a cross thoroughfare on a shorter cut to his hotel, stopped suddenly.

He was just at the head of a short, narrow street known as Bigsby street.

It was not the street that halted him, but the sight of a girl.

Nor would a glimpse at any ordinary-girl have halted him.

This one was far from being ordinary.

In the first place, though plainly not more than seventeen years old, she was almost as tall as our hero.

Her figure, though slender, was as rounded as the sculptured work of some classic worker in marble.

Not like marble, though, was the tint of her skin.

That was of the dark olive that Ben admired so much.

Last of all, in his lightning-like survey, he noted how wonderfully pretty she was.

Her soft, dark eyes, too, looked as if they might be able to dance in a way to set a fellow's pulses moving.

At a glance, though rather plainly garbed, she was a girl of wealth, though that was a feature that hardly appealed to the youngster.



"Where have I seen her before?" wondered the boy, in that instant of survey.

Then, almost at once:

"No; surely enough I've never seen her before, or I'd never have forgotten her. Yet that pretty face does look strangely familiar."

Right now the girl looked in his direction for the first time.

Though she flushed slightly to find the boy staring at her so hard, she came straight toward him.

"You are surprised," she smiled, "at finding me here."

"Just a bit," Ben nodded, lifting his hat.

"Is it a very rough neighborhood?" she inquired, anxiously.

"Well, I understand that Bigsby street furnishes its full share of people to the police courts."

"Yet there is someone in this street that I really must see," pleaded the girl.

"Do you know where the party lives?"

"Oh, yes. At No. 24."

"Then you can easily find him."

"Do you think I shall be quite safe in going there?" she queried, anxiously.

It was Ben's time to be promptly bold.

"You'll be quite safe, miss," he smiled steadily. "Quite safe, for I intend to go with you."

She showed no sign of offence, but rather of relief.

"Oh, if you will be good enough," she replied, half-pleadingly. "That is, if it is not too much trouble."

"Trouble?" echoed Ben. "I can't imagine anything else in the world that would give me as much pleasure."

He spoke so earnestly, heartily, looked into her eyes so steadily, that she flushed once more.

Yet she was quick to see that he means no offence, and the flush was followed by a smile.

"No. 24, you said?" he asked, before she could change her mind. "That will be on the other side of the street. Allow me."

He laid a reverent hand gently on one arm, piloting her across the pavement.

They had but a dozen doors to go down the street, then halted before a dingy-looking four-story brick tenement house.

Almost unconsciously the girl halted at the door.

"Of course you will let me go in with you?" hinted Ben.

"I wouldn't feel easy about your safety if I didn't go with you. On what floor are the people you want to see?"

"The top floor, I believe."

"All the more reason for my going up with you, miss. You are going on an errand of charity, I take it?"

"I am a settlement worker," she replied. "I have never been down in this street before, though. Candidly, I don't like the looks of the street."

"You will be quite safe with me, I think."

"Oh, I am sure of that," she answered, with a swift flash of the dark eyes that set the boy's pulses to tingling.

"The sooner we go up, then, the sooner we shall be through," he hinted. "What is the name of the people?"

"Bagley."

"Come on, please."

He followed her up the stairs of the four flights, the sight of a shapely foot that flashed frequently before his eyes rewarding him for his inability to see her face as they climbed.

The Bagleys, a family of six, living in noisome squalor, occupied one of the two tenements on the top floor.

Ben stood close to the door while the girl talked with the mother and father of the family.

The fair visitor made some notes of supplies that the family needed, then turned, with a sigh of relief, to our here.

"And now, I think, we are quite through here."

"Glad of it!" Ben muttered, inwardly, for he did not like the looks of the doorway of the rear tenement.

That door had opened for an instant.

Just a brief glimpse had our hero had of the faces of three men who stood there and peered out.

All were hard faces, and in the eyes of each there shone an eager, wicked look that the boy did not like.

"Shall we go down now?" asked the girl, as she came toward the door of the Bagley tenement.

"Might as well," Ben nodded. "If you are quite through."

"Quite through."

"Then pass ahead of me, please, miss."

"Why not follow you?" she smiled back at him.

"Just a whim of mine," he answered, lightly.

Truth to tell, he wondered whether the three evil-looking men in the back tenement had formed any design of snatching at the girl's purse, or otherwise attacking her.

"They can't do that very well if I am right behind her," Ben thought swiftly.

Without a word the young lady passed ahead of him into the ill-smelling hallway.

Ben kept about six feet behind her.

She turned the stairs to go down.

Just as our hero turned, however, the door of the rear tenement opened noiselessly behind him.

A brawny pair of hands shot out with the swiftness of serpents.

Clutch! The boy's throat was gripped so tightly that he had no time or chance to make a sound.

Jerk! That powerful assailant lifted him clean off his feet.

It was a clever piece of noiseless work!

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE GANG GETS GRIMLY BUSY.

Grip! Another scoundrel had Ben by the feet, while the third seized his arms.



Not a chance was there to struggle, or to reach out and make a warning sound.

Added to that, all was growing black before his eyes, so severe was the choking.

Even the slight click of the girl's heels, as she went down the stairs, sounded faint and far-away.

Stealthily as so many cats, the trio bore Ben swiftly back the other side of the door, which closed softly.

"Now, we've got him!" whispered the brute who held the boy so mercilessly by the throat. "A long wait, but our time came at last! Let go of him. He won't move!"

Nor did Ben.

He had lost consciousness under that fearful strangling.

Like dead he lay when his first captor carried him into a room and lay him down on the floor.

But the other two sped out, leaving the grimmest of the three to stand guard over the unconscious boy.

Some moments passed. Then the vanished pair came back.

"All right," nodded one of them.

Still Ben lay on the floor without stirring.

Perhaps ten minutes, in all, had passed when a slight moan came from the boy's lips.

"Your kid's coming back, Kel," observed one of the trio to Ben's first assailant.

"Why wouldn't he?" demanded the other, gruffly. "D'ye think I'd send him off as easy as that?"

"Not with The Drum to think about!"

"What The Drum got this kid must get—and more!" growled Kelly, with an oath.

"But The Drum ain't dead."

"He might as well be, though, as to be cooped up in a 6x9 with bars on the door!"

"What are ye going to do with the kid, Kel?"

"Scare him to death, first."

"And then?"

"Kill him—of course."

Neither of the other two seemed alarmed by this statement, which Kelly plainly made in all honesty.

The brute's greenish eye gleamed with a light that spoke of many a past dark deed cheerfully performed.

Ben opened his eyes with a gasp and a start.

Then he tried to sit up.

"Lay down!" ordered Kelly, giving the youngster a vicious kick in his side.

"Ugh!"

Ben did lay down again, stripped of wind once more by that vicious kick.

"And keep on laying there! Savvy?" growled Kelly, bending over the boy.

Ben nodded, not trying to speak.

But, as he lay there, still a little less than half-dazed, the whole thing came back to our hero.

"The girl—did she get away?" he wondered, feeling a sickness beneath the belt that was not due to his own rough treatment.

Twisting his head, first to one side and then to the other, he tried to peer about the room.

"Looking for the gal?" leered Kelly.

"Yes," whispered Ben.

"Don't worry about her."

"She got away?" eagerly.

"No; we've got her all right, all right."

"Oh, you're lying!" flared Ben.

"Have yer own way, kid," replied Kelly, coolly.

"You want to torture me."

"Oho! So you're struck on the gal, are ye? That's bad for her."

This from another member of the trio.

"We've waited a long time for ye, but we've got ye pickled at last," Kelly announced grimly.

"You're the——" began Ben gaspingly, then stopped.

"You're guessing close. Go ahead!" nodded Kelly, with evil encouragement.

"You're Hoo-hoos?"

As Ben pronounced the name he felt actually sick at heart.

"Somebody must have told ye," grinned Kelly. "Yes; we are The Drum's friends—which you ain't—more's the bad luck for ye!"

Though Ben Wright's face was a sickly white, he was really thinking more about the girl than himself.

Had she really fallen into their hands?

From the cleverness and silence of his own capture it did not seem doubtful that they captured the girl, too, if they wanted.

"Why didn't I recognize these fellows?" groaned Ben.

"Now, I know the face of that biggest man. I remember seeing him in that Christopher street crowd that night. But that poor girl who trusted in my protection! Oh, they can't have got her! She'd be here if they had seized her!"

"So ye think we didn't get the girl?" leered Kelly.

"I know you're lying," sputtered Ben.

"Show him, Jab."

The shift-eyed individual addressed as Jab bent over to hold a lock of dark hair before the boy's eyes.

"Oh, you fiends!" quivered the boy, trying to rise.

But Kelly gave him a shove back.

"Now ye begin to believe, do ye, kid?" leered the brute. Ben could not help but believe.

That lustrous lock of dark hair could not be other than from the head of the girl whom he had known fifteen minutes.

"Stuck on her, ain't ye?" sneered Kelly.

Ben did not answer.

"She won't be stuck on you, though. She'll be told that it's on yer account that she was nabbed. Then, when she has had time to hate ye, she'll get the same that you're going to get."

"You wouldn't dare harm her!" Ben protested, angrily.

"An' why wouldn't we?" Kelly demanded, with another oath.



"But I don't really care about her," Ben cried, desperately.

"We'll tell her ye say so," mocked Kelly.

"I never saw her until a few minutes ago."

"Keep that to tell the children!"

"But it's the truth, I tell you," proclaimed Wright, hoarsely.

"Oh, of course ye wouldn't lie about it!"

Ben remained silent, closing his eyes, for he wanted to think.

He no longer doubted that these boldly clever rascals, who had captured him with so little trouble, had also made a prisoner of the girl who was still a stranger to him.

"This is awful!" he shuddered. "If they do harm to her—on my account! Oh, why can't the scoundrels believe me?"

With a sudden twist he sprang to his feet.

"Help! Police!" he bawled desperately at the top of his voice.

At the same instant he dashed madly for the door of the little room.

Whump! Kelly's fist landed against his neck, felling the boy, but not stunning him this time.

Then the brute stood coolly over him.

"No one can hear ye, kid, except Bagley," sneered the tormentor. "Bagley, he don't dare open his yawp about us."

"Let him yell, if it'll do him any good," advised the shifty-eyed one. "Nobody'll hear that'll want to help."

Ben's heart sank still further as he realized that this statement was true beyond a doubt.

Criminals do not live in a house, and carry on their operations there, without being sure that the other tenants are of their own kind.

"Say, when are you going to let me go?" demanded Ben, hoarsely.

He was crazy at the thought of the girl's peril.

"Go?" laughed Kelly, as if this were some new joke.

"Ye'll go about as far as the kitchen!"

"He might as well go there now," advised the shifty-eyed one, in a voice so husky with dread that Ben shivered despite himself.

"Take him along, then," agreed Kelly. "But don't try to holler, kid. It won't do ye any good, and ye'll get knocked on the head for it."

Of this Ben Wright had not a doubt by this time.

These men were truly enough Hoo-hoos—members of a gang that had done a ghastly lot of head-knocking in New York.

The other two picked him up, by shoulders and heels, Kelly walking beside the boy.

Out into a narrow hall they bore him, and into a tiny, bare kitchen that contained only a small, rusty stove, a table and three chairs.

Yes; one more article of furniture or fixture—a sink that was soon to play a ghastly part in the night's dread work!

Chuck him on his face," directed Kelly, calmly.

The order was obeyed with not a little force, as his carriers turned Ben over and dropped him to the floor.

Kelly's heavy knees were pressing against Wright's shoulder-blades.

"Put yer arms back of ye, or we'll break 'em!" came the cheerful promise.

"My best hold is to obey," thought Ben, desperately.

He gave up his arms, allowing them to be folded behind him.

Then, with speed and skill, Kelly bound his arms.

"Get him on to his feet," gruffed this leader.

The other two lifted our hero, holding him at either side.

"Now, show him the sink," commanded Kel.

Over to that fixture they dragged their young captive.

"Ye'll observe that in this sink," grinned Kelly, "there's a trap and a pipe connection. That pipe flows into the sewer. Make sure of that much?"

"Of course," nodded Ben, feeling that it was best to humor these men by answering them.

"So that anything that flows into that sink will keep on until it hits the sewer," continued Kel, as calmly as before. "Now, guess what's goin' to flow into the sink?"

Ben realized, without another hint.

Back he started, paling, but he could not get out of the grip of the pair who held him.

From an inner vest pocket Kel produced something wrapped in a huge red handkerchief.

"Ever see anything jest like this?" demanded the Hoo-hoo, unwrapping the folds of the handkerchief and holding up a grisly object to view.

It was a short, broad-bladed, razor-edged knife.

"Ye'll lose a bit of blood, I s'pose, when I draw this edge across yer," grinned Kel, wickedly. "Then, while ye're able, ye can have the fun of watchin' the red stuff flow down the sink!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### BEN FIGHTS AGAINST HOPE.

"You won't do that!" gasped the horror-struck boy.

"Won't we?" snarled the brute leader. "Feel it?"

Kel drew the edge ever so lightly over the boy's skin. Ben tried to draw back, but his captors held him close.

"No, it didn't even start the skin," observed Kel, after bending forward for a look at Ben Wright's quivering flesh. "But this steel'll open the skin all right when I shove harder."

"Do it now," begged the shifty-eyed one. "It makes me sick at the stomach waitin' fer such a job!"

"Ye ain't much on nerve, Jab," sneered Kelly.

"Oh, I can stand a job, all right, when it has to be done," retorted Jab. "But I don't like to play over it an hour."



"Then we'll accommodate ye at once," laughed Kel, leaning forward for a better look at the boy's white face.

Ben's captors held him absolutely fast this time.

Ben saw the steel flash before his eyes.

"Don't!" he implored, faintly. "I can make it worth your while not to."

Kelly calmly drew the knife back.

The brute was prepared to enjoy any lengthening of the torment, anyway.

"What's that ye said, kid?"

"Let me go——"

"Oh! Eh!"

"And I can make it worth your while."

"How?"

"I'll pay you—pay you well!" Ben promised, frantically.

"Oh, ye'll pay for yer life, will ye?" demanded Kel.

"I'll pay you well, men," urged Ben, in a voice that grew steadier as he saw a ray of hope. "Only there's one condition."

"A condition, eh?" demanded Kel. "Let's hear it."

"You must set the girl free."

"Must, eh?"

"And I must know that she's free."

"Then ye are stuck on her, ain't ye?" guffawed Kel.

"That was my mistake!" Ben gasped, in inward terror.

"How much for the gal's life?" demanded Kel, as if interested.

"Five hundred dollars!" quivered Ben, leaping at once to a high figure.

But Kel gave a snort of disdain.

"Cheap sort of girl, ain't she?"

Ben's eyes flashed sudden fire.

Though he had known the girl a scant quarter of an hour—did not even know her name—she was all in the world to him.

Kel, reading the look in the boy's eyes, laughed coarsely.

"Come! Ain't she a dearer girl'n that?" insisted the brute.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars to set her free," throbbed Ben.

"Make it two thousand," hinted the leader.

"Will you take it if I do?" demanded Ben, with spirit.

"How much for yerself?" queried Kel, with mild interest.

"Another thousand for my own life," came the prompt offer.

"Making three thousand in all?" computed Kel, slowly.

"That's what!" Ben declared in a flash.

"Can't you make it four?" calmly continued the tormentor.

"I would, if I really believed you'd take it and act on the square."

"Make it five, then," in the same dull voice.

"See here," quavered Ben, "I'll do that. And that's top notch, too. It'll take every dollar I can raise in the world."

"Then ye've really got five thousand that ye can raise?" Kel wanted to know.

"Yes. I have."

"It's a good deal of money for a boy of yer age to have," hinted Kel, slowly.

"Then relieve me of it, and act on the square," begged Ben.

"Act on the square, eh? That's not a bad idea all around," went on Kel, slowly. "You say ye've got five thousand. How do we know ye have?"

Ben hesitated a moment.

He had the money in the bank, surely and fast enough. Yet, even if at liberty, he could not get the money earlier than nine o'clock the next morning.

Those Hoo-hoos were not of the green, innocent kind who would accept a stranger's mere bank check.

Even if they did, and let him go, Ben could stop payment of it the following morning—a fact that they must know as well as he.

"Where is the money?" Kel demanded, at last.

"In the bank, of course."

"A bad place for a Hoo-hoo to get it out of," commented the brute, drily.

"You wouldn't take my word to act on the square, I suppose?" Ben demanded desperately.

"Well, not easily," Kel grinned.

In that, though they did not know it, they did Ben Wright an injustice.

So worried was he about the girl who had flashed into his life that, had they produced her, and then set her at liberty unharmed, Ben Wright would gladly have kept his word and paid the gang in full as soon as the bank opened.

"I'll tell you how we can fix it," Ben went on, presently.

"Sit down," invited Kel, with pretended good-nature.

"I always try to be a gentleman with my company."

He pushed a chair toward the boy. It was placed so that Ben, seated on it, had his back to the sink.

"Now, let's hear how ye'll fix the deal so it won't leak," proposed the brute.

"First of all," began Ben, "I've got to know that you really have the young lady. Without I see that for myself, the game won't be played."

"Well?" insinuated Kel.

"Bring the girl in here, so that I can see her," Ben went on, throbbingly. "Then leave her here all night, so I can see she comes to no harm."

"What's the rest of the scheme?"

"In the morning get a cab."

"That's jest our style," mocked Kel, winking at the others. "We always ride."

"Take the girl in the cab, one of your crowd riding with her. The other two of you walk along with me to



the bank, which ain't far from here. We'll step into the bank, myself and one of you on either side of me. The cab, with the girl and one of your crowd, can wait outside. I'll write my check for five thousand dollars, get the money, and pass it over to you. Then you're to turn us loose."

"That ain't so bad for a scheme," admitted Kel, thoughtfully. "But there's a few holes in it."

"What are they?" Ben asked, eagerly.

He was beginning to have hope now, that he could get out of this fearful scrape.

But his hope was still more for the dark-eyed girl.

"Well, in the first place," proceeded the brute, "it ain't a heap likely that ye've got any such wad at the bank."

"But I have," Ben protested, tremulously. "You fellows have been keeping your eyes on me. You know, well enough, that I've got a good business, with offices and people working for me."

"Most kinds of business are run on wind, though, instead of money," Kel observed truly.

There was a look of suspicion in his eyes that did not indicate his looking upon the plan with any great degree of favor.

"Besides," went on Kel, a second later, "how do we know ye won't give the grand yowl when ye get on the street? Try to have us jugged the way ye did with 'The Drum'?"

"Why, with one man beside the girl in the cab, and myself between two of you, don't you suppose I'd know the consequences of making an outcry?" argued Ben Wright. "Do you think I take you for such weak stuff that you'd ever let us get away alive if we tried any tricks on you?"

This view of the case plainly flattered the Hoo-hoos. They grinned in a self-satisfied way that made Ben resolve to try more well-concealed "taffy" of the kind that suited their taste.

"There's another trouble," Kel went on. "I guess that about settles the scheme."

"What is it?" the boy demanded, his heart again beginning to thump just as it had started to beat naturally.

"Why, we know we ain't just the handsomest critters alive," continued the brute. "Fact is, we'd make the cops look twice at us, any time. Now, what'd the cops do if they spied ye passing along between me and Jab? They'd pinch us—sure! Same thing with Dink, in the cab with the gal!"

"But I'd swear it was all right," urged Ben, desperately.

"Ye would, if we had any show to crack ye," grunted Kel. "But, if ye had any chance to skin a dozen feet away from us ye'd hang us with yer lip!"

"But you'd still have the girl in your power," Ben pleaded, his lips trembling as he spoke.

"Oh, yes, we would!" jeered Jab.

"Even if ye've really got the wad in the steel cage," pronounced Kelly, "I don't call yer scheme good."

"Let us think it over," begged Ben. "We'll find some way yet."

"We'll think it out fer ourselves, then," announced Kel. "Ye're a kid, with a kid's garret in the upper story, and ye can't help none in games like we play."

Ben was still seated in the chair, his hands bound behind his back.

Kel looked to make sure that the lashing was still secure.

Then, whipping out another cord, he tied the boy fast to the chair.

"We're goin' to leave ye a bit, an' go out front to think the scheme over," Kel announced, confidentially. "Ye can holler fer help, if ye want; but if ye do we'll come in and show ye the sink, with gallons of the red stuff running down it."

With this parting threat, the genuineness of which our hero did not for an instant doubt, Kel signed to the others to follow him out of the room.

Ben could hear them whispering in another room.

Once in a while one of the voices sounded in a low grunt.

But not a word could our hero make out.

Would they never agree.

"What fools men can be when they're suspicious!" quavered the wretched boy, inwardly. "They'd get the money if they'd try me. I'd use them straight, no matter what chance I had to do different. I'd do that and more, for that dear girl's sake."

Then another thought came flashing into his mind:

"I could offer them more than five thousand. Would it do any good?"

Ben deliberated on that, as on a happy idea.

"But it wouldn't do a bit of good," he groaned. "If I made it the whole eight thousand that I could raise, they wouldn't trust me any the more. Five thousand would buy these fellows if anything would."

But in this estimate Ben shot a little under the mark.

The Hoo-hoos prided themselves on being the toughest, scrappiest gang that had ever infested the great city of New York.

With them revenge was likely to count even higher than cash.

More than an hour must have passed. Ben could still hear the arguing voices.

At last, though, there came a lull.

In that same instant Ben Wright felt a faint thrill.

After working busily during the whole time, he at last succeeded in getting his hands free, and in untying himself from the chair.

"Can I make a bolt, and sneak—or will they stop me and get me?" he wondered, throbbingly.

Vain hope—slight as it was.

Out in the hall the feet of the men sounded. They were returning to him.

Jab and Dink came straight on in.



Kel halted in the doorway to gaze tauntingly at the captive.

"They've got me blocked, anyway!" Ben quivered.

"Well," he called, trying to make hope and confidence sound strong in his voice, "you've decided that my offer is on the level?"

"Somewhat different," smiled Kel, from the doorway. "Kid, we don't see no way to take up yer offer. We're goin' to stick to the first plan. Help him up, Jab."

That worthy started toward the captive.

In that brief instant Ben Wright acted so swiftly that he had no time to think.

He acted on blind impulse.

Jumping up, he swung the chair over his head with lightning speed.

Crack! That chair landed squarely across Jab's head, sending that scoundrel sprawling.

Still moving on blind impulse, Ben sprang forward two steps more.

Biff! Down went Dink, with a broken nose.

But Ben never stopped to find that out.

One more barrier ahead—and Kel had had time to clear for action.

But Ben never paused to reckon consequences.

He rushed straight at the burly, outreaching fist.

Then, just as he was on the jot of colliding with that fist, down he fell to his knees.

Grip! He had both of Kel's ankles in his hold.

Wrench! The strongest man alive could not have stood just then.

Kel fell over backward, clutching out wildly with his arms.

But he fell to the floor, just the same, landing on the back of his head, and being stunned for just a bare second.

All clear ahead?

Ben had no time to think of that.

He raced to the hall door, which he found bolted.

Quiveringly, trembling like a leaf, he fumbled at the bolt.

Back of him he heard Kel getting on to his feet with a snort like that of a mad bull.

Click! Back shot the bolt.

Out into the hallway raced Ben, but he heard Kel after him in hot chase.

Ben did not stop to run downstairs.

He passed half a dozen steps at a time as he went downward at wild leaps.

Still back of him, on the stairs, he heard the frantic Kel.

Another flight, and another one!

Only the last flight of stairs left now—but Kel, from the sound, was gaining!

Ben never stopped to look or calculate.

Wrenching open the street door, he darted out on to the crowded sidewalk in the last, dying light of the day.

Yet not even here in the numerous sidewalk throng did the boy dare slack up.

A Hoo-hoo was quite capable of following, and of having the affair out to the finish in the midst of a crowd that would flee in panic.

Straight onward dashed Wright, breaking his way through the crowd.

Then up loomed a broad, gray-coated figure.

Bump! Ben collided jarringly with that well-dressed man.

Recovering himself, our hero used his eyes as he came to a panting stop.

"John Desmond?" he gasped.

"You, Wright?" demanded the merchant, looking wonderingly at the boy.

But Ben had him by the sleeve.

"Out of here, quick, Mr. Desmond! There are Hoo-hoos about. Neither one of us has a life worth a cent on this block!"

Yet, as Ben tried to lead the flight, Desmond gripped him sturdily by the sleeve.

"Wright," gasped the startled merchant, "does that explain what has happened to my daughter?"

"Your—daughter!"

"Yes. She failed to get home in time. I telephoned the College Settlements, and found she had gone to this street. The idiots didn't know the number."

Ben listened, for a moment, in horror.

"See here, Mr. Desmond, is your daughter about as tall as I am, slender, dressed in gray—a girl with an olive complexion and the most wonderful eyes?"

"Yes. You've seen her?" implored the father.

"I'm on the way for the police—they must find her," flashed Ben. "Come! Rush!"

Desmond had turned with the boy. Both were forging ahead fast now.

"Where is she—what happened?" faltered the tortured father.

"The Hoo-hoos——"

"Good Heaven! Couldn't they respect an innocent girl?"

"I was with her—didn't know who she was," flashed Ben, as they rushed almost breathlessly. "I don't know where—Police!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### A HOO-HOO DEATH TRAP.

On the corner just ahead a blue-coated, drab-helmeted policeman had just hove into sight, his head showing over the other citizens.

At the frantic hail this active young officer came dashing toward the rushing pair.

"Get help!" gasped John Desmond.

Taking in the solid, prosperous appearance of the merchant, together with his distracted look, the policeman bent over and sharply rapped the sidewalk twice.



Then, in hurried voices, Ben and his former employer told their stories almost in the same breaths.

Another policeman arrived on the run.

Ere they had reached the door of No. 24 a third officer had joined them.

One of these was a roundsman. While he was taking command a fourth police officer sprinted up.

"Remain on the sidewalk, you," ordered the roundsman, looking at one of his men. "The rest come with me."

Ben and his former employer followed without waiting for anything as unnecessary as an invitation.

Rapidly the police party scurried through the house.

Up on the third floor, at last, at the rear tenement just under that from which our hero had so lately escaped, they found a bolted door to which no one came in answer.

"Down with the door!" commanded the roundsman.

Crash! Three strong pairs of shoulder broke down that barrier in a twinkling.

There, in a middle room of the tenement, the glare of a police flashlight revealed the Desmond girl, lying on the floor, bound and gagged.

"Clara!" panted her father, and seemed so likely to fall that Ben caught him and braced him.

The roundsman, with the greater coolness of the trained policeman, whipped out his knife, setting the girl free in a twinkling.

"Thank you," said the girl, coolly and sweetly, the instant that the gag had passed from between her lips. "You needn't worry, papa. I'm all right."

In another minute, standing supported by her overjoyed father, Clara Desmond was telling the story of her adventure.

She had not heard a sound when Ben was so neatly trapped behind her.

Imagining him to be close behind her, she had gone on down the stairs until she, too, was as quickly and cleverly caught as her young escort had been.

Into this room she had been brought. Jab, it must have been, who held at her throat until Dink had forced a gag in.

Then they had bound the girl and had left her there.

Then the pair left her.

Since then Clara had seen none of her captors.

Her time she had spent, though with less success than Ben had had, in the effort to slip out of her bonds.

She had heard the fight overhead, followed by the flight and the pursuit downstairs.

She had guessed—had dared to hope—that her young escort had escaped, and that he would succeed in bringing relief without delay.

"And so now, papa," she miled, "you see there's really nothing to worry about."

"Me for a grifty girl like that!" quivered Ben, in devout admiration.

"When the young lady feels able to go——" began the roundsman.

"Why, I'm all right, thank you," Clara broke in, cheer-

ily. "And I rather think I do prefer to get out of this odious place."

John Desmond led his daughter downstairs. Ben followed. A policeman accompanied them, for safety's sake, while the other two officers went aloft to find Kel and his crew, who were no longer there.

Down in the street a crowd of hundreds had gathered.

"Get out of the way, there!" roared the two policemen.

The crowd didn't fall far back, however, but stood at a little distance asking eager questions of each other.

"I'll get through this crowd and get a cab," murmured Ben in Desmond's ear.

Within three minutes a closed cab was at the curb.

John Desmond helped his daughter tenderly inside, then followed her.

"Wright, you must go with us," invited Desmond.

"Oh, by all means," pleaded Clara, and Ben sprang inside.

Then came the roundsman, who also got inside.

As the cab rolled away out of that curious, gaping throng, the roundsman busied himself with getting an account of the affair, to be turned in at the station-house.

Then, at one of the corners, the roundsman alighted and left them.

"Number — Madison avenue," Desmond called to the driver.

"Wright, let's have your story of what happened," begged the merchant.

Ben told it, with all the horror that had been a part of the grewsome experience.

Clara listened steadily. She did not seem like a fainting sort of girl.

"The scoundrels—they've been following us closely, all these weeks when we thought ourselves forgotten," cried John Desmond. "They've even taken the trouble to find out about you, Clara. They knew you, and waited for you, and when you appeared in a neighborhood where they could get you they lost no time."

"I doubt if they knew Miss Desmond, sir," Ben interposed. "They knew me, of course, and they supposed, when they saw me with Miss Desmond—they supposed—"

"Well, what?" demanded her father, sharply.

"They supposed—er——" Ben tried, but flushed painfully.

"Say it, can't you, lad?" commanded Mr. Desmond.

"Well, sir, they supposed your daughter was someone dear to me. They thought to break my heart by putting her in danger."

"That must have been the infernal idea of it all—sure enough," nodded the merchant. "But, confound it, if the police give this yarn to the newspapers, the Hoo-hoos will find out that they really did have my daughter. They'll know her another time, if they succeed in keeping at large."

In due course of time they reached the address on Madison avenue.

Ben Wright found himself being ushered into just such



a big, spacious, elegant home as he would have expected John Desmond to live in.

"Come up to my room, Wright, and get yourself ready for dinner," proposed the merchant.

Fifteen minutes later they came down to the drawing-room.

Soon after Clara entered, sweeter and more wonderfully beautiful than ever in an evening gown that showed her shapely neck and her firm, rounded shoulder and arms.

It was a wonderful evening. Ben could hardly remember it in detail, afterward.

But after dinner he remained, talking with father and daughter, until his good sense told him that it was time to leave.

Not much did he sleep that night, after his return to the hotel.

Only toward daylight did he fall into a doze in which, in dreams, he lived all of the last few exciting hours over again.

Yet he was astir at the usual time, and eight o'clock found him at his desk in that flourishing office in Fourteenth street.

And with daylight, too, Ben Wright had become again the keen young boy of business.

He went over the last details of the new scheme with Steve Dorsey.

"Now, hustle out, Steve," directed our hero, finally. "Buy carefully, and without excitement or rush. Look out that your manner doesn't send the prices soaring on next week's delivery of canned goods. Keep cool, keep your head clear, do a good stroke for me, and yesterday's raise of salary may see something added to it in a day or two."

Then came on the run of the day's business.

There were farmers to see, buyers to talk with, and the whole run of the day's busy work.

Yet, through it all, Ben had time to think much of the Hoo-hoos.

"They haven't forgotten, and now they're less likely to than ever," he murmured to himself as he worked busily away over the papers at his desk. "Hello! What's that?"

A shriek in the outer office. He listened. There was a sound of hurried feet.

Then all was quiet again.

"Oh, pshaw! One of the typewriter girls frightened by some joke of the bookkeeper's," smiled the boy. "If it had been trouble, there'd have been more than one yell with four women out there."

He bent over his papers again.

"Smells like something burning," he murmured, glancing up.

Clang! Clang! The noise of approaching fire department apparatus.

"Wonder where the fire is?" muttered the boy, rising from his desk, and crossing the office.

As he pulled the door open he caught a whiff of smoke. There were clouds of it in the middle office.

Like a flash Ben rushed to the next door.

Then he fell back, amazed—terrified.

That outer office was almost a solid mass of flames now.

"The office people forgot me—skipped!" he faltered, tremulously. "This is Hoo-hoo work, as I'm a sinner!"

It would have been madness to try to cross that outer office. The flames would lick up his clothing in an instant.

There were no windows in the middle office.

Back to his own inner office he rushed, choking with the smoke.

But there the two iron-barred windows opened on an air-shaft.

Even if he got through the iron bars, the ground was sixty feet below!

"The Hoo-hoos didn't miss this time!" he gasped, in terror.

## CHAPTER X.

### SIXTY FEET OF DESPAIR.

"I've got to get back and through that outer office somehow!" quavered the fear-stricken youngster.

Yet, even as he thought of that desperate dash, he saw the uselessness of it.

"It can't be done," he decided, pulling himself together and taking the calmer thought that alone could offer any chance of escape. "I'd strangle fighting through the hot air in that outer office. No, no! These windows offer me my sole living chance."

Though there were bars over the windows, there were catches on the inside that were supposed to release the bars.

Fearfully, Ben reached up and tried to open one of the catches.

It was a tussle, with death almost a matter of seconds!

There! The catch yielded at last. Desperately Ben swung the set of bars outward like a shutter.

But now he gazed despairingly down the sixty feet of sheer decent to the yard of the air-shaft below.

"To drop down there would be a rough kind of suicide," he reflected, grimly. "Wonder if anybody could hear me down there?"

Filling his lungs to their fullest capacity, he bellowed down:

"Hello! Can anyone hear me down there? I'm up here on the fifth floor—hemmed in. Hello! Help! Quick!"

He listened, with a dull aching at the heart.

But from below came not a sound in answer—only the crackling of the flames in the front part of the building.

Another sound came soon—the playing of water and the sharp hiss of steam.

The air was heavy with the odor of burning benzine, which showed with what stuff the blaze had been started.

"I can't live here another two minutes," quavered Ben



choking and wheezing from the dull pain that the hot, poisonous air caused in his chest.

Then, as he looked down the sixty feet of space to the yard below, an idea came into his head.

It was a desperate one, with few chances of success, yet there was no hope whatever in any other direction.

Over each of the windows below him were similar iron gratings.

"If I can drop, and catch at the grating of the window just below," he quivered. "Then from there to the next grating, and so to the ground——"

There was no time to think further.

Any fate at all was better than standing there, weakly waiting to be suffocated.

Out on the sill climbed Ben, like a flash.

Down on his knees, he took firm hold of the sill, hanging there for just an instant.

A glance downward—he had a clear head and a steady heart, and it did not make him dizzy.

Drop! Ben shot through space.

Clutch! He had gripped at the grating just below.

The force of it nearly tore his arms from their sockets.

But he hung there. Could he make the next drop in safety, or must he land as a dead, broken body?

"I've got to go on, now, anyway," he breathed, grimly. "I can't hang here all day, so I've got to try it."

Again carefully measuring the distance, he took the next drop.

Again he caught, and held on, groaning with the tearing pain in his shoulder.

But the die was cast. It was life or death—death to remain—a hope of life if he went on downward, catching at the bars.

Thus he landed, trembling, and all but fainting, but safe on the ground of the air-shaft.

"Hello, in there!" he bellowed, peering in through the bars of a ground-floor window.

Men of the protective department were in there in the ground-floor store, busily saving as much as they could of the stock.

"Hello! Come here, please!"

Ben battered busily against the iron bars.

Then one of the men heard him, came back, and opened the bars.

"Where on earth did you come from?" demanded the man.

"From sixty feet above," Ben retorted, cool now that the strain was over.

Hastily through the store he went. Down here there was no smoke—only the steady dripping of water through the floors of the soaked building.

Out on the sidewalk Ben hurried, to the nearest fire-line, where the crowd stood watching the progress of the fire.

But Wright had just one object in view, and he carried it out.

There was Kel, standing at the back of the crowd.

Catching sight of the boy, he started, shot a black look, then took to his heels.

"Stop that fellow that's running!" yelled Ben. "He set the fire!"

Then Kel fairly sprinted, as if for life.

He was a heavy man, but built for speed, nevertheless. For pacemakers the Hoo-hoo had Ben Wright and three long-legged, slimly built, young policemen.

"Stop him!" shouted the police, sprinting at their best along Fourteenth street.

Flash! Kel whipped out a revolver as he ran.

Then people dodged right and left, no one daring to get in his way.

Two of the policemen drew their guns as they raced. That cleared the street ahead for fair.

Kel, with desperation on his side, was rapidly getting the best of it.

If he raced around the next corner, and then the next, he might succeed in getting away through the simple trick of darting into a doorway.

Crack! Crack! One of the policemen fired twice, but he was such a poor shot that Kel disdained to pay any notice.

There was a clear track now. Kel, working at his best to make speed, was confident of getting away.

But he failed to reckon on one thing—an enterprising boy.

That boy, the office boy in a store, stood at the doorway, the window pole in his hand.

He caught sight of Kel, running desperately with a gun in his hand.

Back into the doorway darted the boy, but he lay low. Just as Kel passed that doorway, out shot the window pole.

It caught Kel fairly between the legs as he sped.

Flop!—and Kel was down. A bit dazed, too.

Before he could rise the ruffian found the police a-top of him.

"I'm not dead yet!" roared Kel, struggling to get upon his feet, and lunging out wildly, for his revolver had shot ahead of him as he fell.

He threw one policeman, but the night-sticks of the other two played a savage tattoo on his head that brought him down.

"Now they've got him," throbbed Ben, as he stood by watching the officers slipping handcuffs over Kel's wrists. Now they raised him to his feet.

Snap! Straining with his powerful wrists, Kel broke the chain connecting the handcuffs.

Like a flash, he turned and bolted.

Crack! It was past the time for fooling. A lucky shot from a policeman's revolver brought Kel down with a hole drilled through his left calf.

And now he was safely secured.

"Who makes the charge of setting that fire against this fellow?" demanded a roundsman, who had raced up.

"I do," Ben rejoined. "He's one of the Hoo-hoos."



They have it in for me, and you'll find they set that fire, which was kindled with benzine and started at my office."

"The Hoo-hoos?" repeated the roundsman. "Are you Ben Wright?"

"Just!" nodded Ben.

"Then this man is sure our meat," grinned the roundsman, cheerfully. "We've orders to keep our eyes open for that gang. But you'll have to go to the station, Wright, to explain the charge."

"Oh, that'll be all right," smiled Ben. "There's nothing on my hands at the office just now."

He cast a look back at the old building, from which the smoke was coming less thickly now.

Then he followed two of the officers and Kel to the corner, where a patrol wagon picked them up.

Kel, in the hands of the police, remained sullenly silent, but he glared blackly at Ben all the way to the station-house.

"He's trying to assure me that the gang won't forget me," thought our hero, not without uneasiness, for by this time he had learned that the Hoo-hoos attended very painstakingly to their grudges.

The prisoner booked, and refusing to talk about the charges against him, Ben hurried back to Fourteenth street's wholesale district.

The apparatus of the fire department was still there, but the flames out, the fire-lines down, and the crowd all but deserted.

As Ben hurried up to the door he kept a sharp lookout for his bookkeeper and the four clerks.

There were none of them in sight.

A policeman stood in the doorway.

"Can I go up to my office?" asked Ben.

"Sure thing. But you'll want to be careful. The stairs ain't over-sound, and some of the flooring upstairs is treacherous. But the other folks are up there."

Ben went hurriedly up the stairs.

There he found his people, and not until they heard his story did they realize that they had come near leaving him to his death when they fled.

"Why, I was sure you went out with Mr. Dorsey, sir," protested the shame-faced bookkeeper.

"Well, since I got out after all, it doesn't much matter," our hero smiled.

Then he turned to examine the office.

The front of the building had been well burned, and the floors somewhat, but the destruction was not as great as he had feared it would be.

"Papers and books are all safe, sir," reported the bookkeeper. "I jammed them into the safe before I left."

"I don't see but we can go on with business just the same," our hero laughed.

"Very easily, sir."

"Call up central office, to make sure that the telephone is working."

This was done, with the discovery that the telephone—

indispensable in wholesale business—was still in working order.

Posting his people to keep a watch out for further attempts to set fires, Ben hurried into his inner office.

Almost immediately the telephone bell rang.

The message was from Steve.

"I'm doing first-rate," that young hustler reported. "I've placed nearly all of your orders already."

So Ben, having little to do except to think, leaned back, with his feet up on the slide of his desk, and thought—about Clara Desmond.

"And a nice thing I'm doing to please her," he muttered. "Trying to corner the market so as to put her father in a business hole. But he's my rival in business, and I suppose that all has to be in the game."

Business was going briskly in the outer office, but there seemed to be little for the inside office to do this morning.

Soon after our hero got back from luncheon Steve again called him up.

"Prices are going up a bit," Steve reported. "Either someone else has thought of your scheme, or else your heavy buying is making a bull market among the cans."

"Pay a little higher prices, then, if you have to," Ben directed. "But be as careful as you can. We can very easily go to the wall in this."

"Do you want to make sure of all your orders?" Steve inquired.

"Of course."

"Then, as you're not strong in the market, it would be just as well to cover with certified checks. I can be back in an hour, and start out with the checks. Will you take off the list now if I call it?"

Ben took the list down. Then, as soon as the telephone rang off, he touched a bell and handed the list to one of the clerks who came in.

The checks were soon made out. Ben signed them at his desk, and waited for Steve.

"What a heap sight easier life this is than working for some boss," Ben reflected, as he waited. "And yet I came blamed near giving this simple scheme to Desmond. This may be fool's luck that I'm having, but I'd a heap sight rather be a fool, with a fool's luck, than be clerking for somebody else."

"You'd better get out two more checks, and the business is closed," called Steve, bustling in a little later. "Here's the memoranda."

The checks were ordered. Then Steve produced his notebook and some papers, and the two went thoroughly over them.

The job had been well done.

Ben Wright stood as the purchaser of one hundred and sixty thousand dollars' worth of canned goods, on hand or due to arrive within the next three days.

On this he was to pay, as a guarantee, eight thousand dollars, which took all but some three hundred dollars of his bank account.



But when the two additional checks were brought in, Ben signed them without a tremor.

"Well, I'm off," Steve declared, rising and dropping the checks into his wallet. "I'll be back with the receipts before the afternoon is over."

Once more our hero settled back in his chair, raising his feet to the slide.

Altogether, he was very well satisfied with being his own boss.

"Even if I lose what I've put up to-day, it was money that I made easily, and I can earn more," he thought.

An hour passed.

Ben was taking it easy when his telephone bell jangled. It was Steve's voice.

"I've just seen a stock ticker," that youth reported excitedly.

"Well?"

"No, not 'well.' I'm afraid it's tough news old fellow."

"What's wrong?"

"The government at Washington has just decided not to hold the army and navy manoeuvres."

"That settles it. I shan't vote for Roosevelt again," laughed Ben.

"But this is serious, old chap."

"How so?"

"You've blown in eight thousand dollars, and you stand to lose it," sounded Steve's mournful prediction.

"But I haven't lost it yet."

"You're mighty likely to."

"Cheer up!"

"Glad you take it so easily," admitted Steve.

"Why, it's the only way to take it, Steve. Coming to the office, by the way?"

"I'll be there within twenty minutes."

And now Ben Wright had something in earnest to think of.

It was no longer playtime for him.

His orders had been placed. His whole capital was up in the air.

It was all well enough to say that he could make more money to take the place of what was lost; but now that he found himself face to face with the certainty of losing it seemed a different problem.

"I may find some other demand that'll take the goods," he thought. "I've got to watch and hope, anyway."

Then Steve rushed in.

But he failed to find Ben downcast. Instead, our hero gave his representative a greeting so cheery that Dorsey stared.

"Why, Ben, you look as if you were used to losing money," that puzzled youth observed.

"Probably I shall be, if I remain in business long enough," Ben smiled.

Ting-ling-ling! Ben caught up the receiver. It was John Desmond's voice.

That made Steve hitch his chair closer.

"All right, Ben?" inquired the merchant.

"Why, yes," the boy answered. "I guess so—all except a fire that the Hoo-hoos started here this morning. The police have got that fellow Kelly. I meant to have telephoned you about it."

"The police may have Kelly, my boy, but I'm afraid the Hoo-hoos again have my girl."

"What's that?" Ben cried, sharply.

"Clara went out on her Settlement work again this morning. She wasn't home to lunch, so the housekeeper telephoned me."

"Do you know which way she went?" Ben asked, tremulously.

"Not a word as to where she went, Wright."

"The safest thing, then, is to start from Bigsoy street."

"Have you any time to spare, Ben, to help me?" sounded the old merchant's voice.

"Any time?" jerked Ben. "I've got the rest of my life if it's needed!"

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE EARTH STOPS MOVING!

"I never quite knew the meaning of despair before!"

"It's awful!" chattered Ben.

He was in Mr. Desmond's library.

It was two o'clock in the morning.

All the rest of that afternoon, and all through the night these two, aided by Steve, aided by the police and by private detectives who were called in, had been searching the town for a trace of Clara Desmond.

But that young woman had disappeared as completely as if she had never lived.

Only one thing seemed certain.

The police, as well as the other searchers, felt certain that this tragedy was the vengeful work of the Hoo-hoos.

The Drum had been taken to police headquarters. There he had been put through the "third degree," with all its ingenuities.

But The Drum had stolidly protested that he knew nothing about the matter, and that he had no present knowledge of the hanging-out places of any members of the gang.

Kelly had been stiffly questioned as he lay on a cot in a hospital, but not a thing could be learned from him.

Ben's descriptions of Jab and Dink had been furnished to the police and the detectives, but not a sight of these rascals had been obtained.

John Desmond had asked the newspapers to announce that he would gladly pay a reward of twenty thousand dollars for the safe return of his daughter, and that he pledged himself not to prosecute.

"I can't sit still," moaned Mr. Desmond.

"You ought to get some rest, sir," urged Ben. "I'm younger, and I can stand the racket. I can stay here all



the night by the telephone, if nothing else. Lie down on that sofa, won't you, sir?"

And Desmond did. He aroused at six in the morning. There was no news to be had.

The police reported no progress.

Bright newspaper reporters had been out hustling ever since the newspaper offices heard of the case.

The detectives—a dozen of them—had worked tirelessly.

Hundreds of people, attracted by the reward, were busy-ing themselves all over New York with trying to find some trace of the missing girl.

Ben and the merchant breakfasted sorrowfully together.

Then they started for their respective offices, agreeing to keep in touch with each other over the wire.

Another hour, and then in came Steve, with a long face.

"No news about Miss Desmond, I suppose."

"Not a word."

"Then we might as well talk about other things. The news in the canned goods market is mighty bad."

"Hang canned goods!" gritted Ben.

"There may be a ten-per-cent drop by night. I hear that the Western market is overstocked, and is unloading cheap and shipping fat."

This, if true, meant ruin for Ben Wright.

Ordinarily the young business man would have been on edge at such news.

Now he merely smiled in a doleful way.

"Steve, I can't get up any interest in the market."

"You'd better try."

"Not a bit of use."

"You're thinking all the time about that girl," warned Dorsey.

"So would you if you knew her."

"But you'd better get back to your business a bit."

"Well?" demanded Ben, dullv. "Do you know any way to save the day?"

"I can't see one plainly."

"Neither can I," smiled Ben, sadly. "So what's the use of talking about such a dull thing as business?"

"See here, Ben, you ain't going to be any good for a while. I can see that. You'd better let me handle your business for you for a while."

"Not as long as I can sit up and notice things, thank you."

Steve Dorsey shook his head.

"The money loss must have rattled his head," thought Steve, stupidly. "It is tough to lose so much."

But Ben gave no sign, other than to sit there, drumming on his desk with the fingers of one hand.

"There's nothing special for me to do?" Dorsey inquired, rising.

"No."

"Then I'll go out into the outer office until you wake up, old fellow. I hope that will be soon."

It was!

Jing-a-ling! Desmond's voice, and an excited one.

"Ben, I can't stand this any longer. I'm coming up to your office, if you'll let me. If I don't do something I feel that I shall go crazy!"

"Come right on up," Ben invited.

"I'll be there in five minutes."

"Oh! Then you're in the neighborhood?"

"Yes."

"Come right over, then."

John Desmond was as punctual as he had promised to be.

He looked twenty years older as he tottered into his former clerk's office.

Ben looked at him pityingly.

"Mr. Desmond, what you need is plenty of walking to wear the edge off your nervousness. Will you come out with me?"

"Where?"

"We may as well start the search all over again, from the same point—Bigsby street."

"I'll go, then."

So Ben led the way through the offices.

"Come along, Steve," he whispered to that youth, who was seated and reading a newspaper.

"Where?" asked Dorsey, jumping up.

"Come out and help me walk Desmond about a bit," our hero whispered, his former employer having already stepped outside. "I'm afraid the old man will go crazy if he isn't kept busy."

Steve nodded, and at once became all business.

"Do you really think there's a ghost of a show?" asked the hollow-eyed old man, as they reached the sidewalk.

"Why, of course there is," Ben rejoined, almost sunnily. "Don't you suppose the reward will do its work when it becomes understood. People like the Hoo-hoos would sell their souls for less than a thousand dollars. They've often done it. They'll sell your daughter back, on the jump, for the price you offer."

"If they've not already made way with her," Desmond moaned.

They turned into Bigsby street.

All was livelier there than usual. The street felt proud of being in the newspapers in a big case.

John Desmond talked little.

He leaned on Ben, who gripped one of his arms.

Then, all of a sudden, Desmond came within an ace of falling.

For Ben, his prop, released him and darted forward.

Steve was after him in a twinkling.

"Get the nearest cop and bring him right here," came back over Wright's shoulder.

Steve turned and darted away.

Ben stopped, suddenly, close to a door on which he had had his eyes.

John Desmond, taking new hope, from the hasty, unexplained actions of the boys, braced up and hurried forward, his eyes burning fiercely.



"What is up?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Sh! That rascal, Jab, may be on the other side of that door, listening."

"Jab? One of the gang, you mean?" quivered the old man.

"Yes; the fellow had just started to look out when he caught sight of us and bolted in again."

"But this is not the last house the scoundrels were in."

"No; it's a block and a half away. But it looks like another Hoo-hoo hang-out."

"But——"

"Here come Steve and the cop!" Ben broke in, excitedly.

"Now, perhaps, we shall learn something."

The policeman, a young man, came with a swift, long stride. He stopped when Ben darted forward, a hand up warningly.

"Can you get another officer?" the boy asked.

"Necessary?"

"You'll have to go against the Hoo-hoos," and our hero quickly told what was up.

"You folks'll be with me, as witnesses, if I have to do any shooting?" inquired the policeman.

"I'll stick with you. So will the rest."

"Come on, then. This the door?"

Ben nodded, as the three gathered behind the policeman.

The door was not locked. They pushed it open and entered.

"No one was in the hallways.

"We've got to have another officer," grunted the policeman. "We've got to have one here at the street door to watch."

"My job, then, to get one," panted Steve.

He was out and off, in the opposite direction, the others waiting in the hall until he returned with policeman No. 2.

This second man was posted at the street entrance. Then the little party started to ascend.

"Top floor first, and we'll work down," the young policeman whispered back.

There were two tenements on a floor here, as in the other building.

The seekers, moving quietly, reached the top floor.

In order not to give too swift alarm, the policeman knocked gently.

There was no reply.

Crash! In a jiffy that stalwart young man had broken in the door.

"Twenty-three! The cops!" roared a voice.

It was Dink, in the hallway of the tenement.

He rushed swiftly back into the kitchen, and the policeman, with drawn revolver, darted after him.

There the policeman found himself confronted by two hard-looking characters.

For Jab was also there, and both the Hoo-hoos had drawn revolvers.

Crack! That was the last of Jab, for he went down with a bullet-hole in his forehead.

Another shot—Dink's this time. It sped under the policeman's shoulder, and down past the others in that stuffy little hallway.

Crack! The third shot fired, the policeman's second, and a good one, for now Dink, too, was on the floor.

His spirit had joined Jab's in the next world's receiving place for Hoo-hoos.

"They won't give us any trouble," observed the policeman, coolly, after having looked the prostrate pair over. "Now, see if you can find the girl."

But Ben had already darted into the other rooms on that quest.

"Here she is!" sounded his voice—not exultantly, but chokingly.

Warned by that tone, John Desmond staggered into the little front room.

There on the bare floor lay Clara Desmond, bound tightly, her eyes closed, and her face deathly white.

By her side lay a little, empty bottle.

Ben, choking so that he couldn't speak, was feeling desperately at the girl's pulse.

No pulse—no heartbeat. The stillness of utter despair was upon both father and lover as they knelt there.

The policeman stood by, in sympathetic silence.

But Steve, always the messenger, stole swiftly, silently out of that fearful place.

In less than three minutes Dorsey climbed the stairs again. Behind him, panting, came a medical man with his medicine case.

That gentleman's examination was brief.

"She's been dead for a couple of hours," he announced slowly.

A cry of anguish. John Desmond was on the floor, a candidate for the doctor's attention.

## CHAPTER XII.

### CONCLUSION.

"How do you know Miss Desmond's dead?" Ben broke in fiercely.

"No pulse, no breathing—nothing," replied the medical man. "That bottle there tells the story. Someone gave her poison."

The doctor turned to Mr. Desmond.

"Does he have to be brought to at once?" Ben demanded, sharply.

"No; he'll come to himself if he's left alone."

"Then leave him alone, doctor," rang our hero's command. "There's no sense in bringing the poor old man back to his trouble any sooner than it has to be done. Steve, can you get another doctor?"

Dorsey was off like a shot.

"You're not satisfied with me, then?" asked the medical man, a trifle stiffly.

"Satisfied?" repeated Ben. "Oh, yes. But we want two doctors here."

"I'll go ahead, young man, but I warn you that I haven't



any hope. Of course, I don't know what poison was given to this young lady, but poisoned she was."

Ten minutes of agony went by.

The doctor, after having forced some medicine down the throat, went to work to try to cause artificial breathing. Ben helped, his hands steady and his eyes dry, though he felt as if the world had ceased to be.

John Desmond was just opening his eyes when the second doctor, an older man, hurried in with his medicine case.

Steve carried the doctor's battery.

"We'd better try electricity, don't you think?" suggested the older physician, mildly.

The younger doctor nodded, and both went to work. At the end of an hour a slight gasp was noticed in the girl's throat and chest.

Ben was on his knees now, as close to the girl as he could get without hampering the medical man.

In the meantime, the police had carried out the bodies of the dead Hoo-hoos. The first policeman summoned still remained.

Another gasp. Then Clara gave a slight moan.

"The first chance in the world, now!" throbbed Ben, his old knack for looking on the bright side of things coming back to him.

Desmond was on his knees, too, beside the girl.

And then, at last, in a moment of great joy for all, Clara opened her eyes.

She started affrightedly, but then, as her gaze met that of her father, and next of Ben, she smiled weakly.

After a while she was so far recovered that John Desmond and Ben took the young lady to her home.

The family doctor was called, and late in the evening Clara was reported out of all danger.

She had no recollection of her capture, however.

"Doing well in business, Wright?" asked John Desmond, as they sat in the library after having heard the latest report from the young lady's room.

"Fairly well," Ben nodded.

It didn't seem necessary to add that he had stocked up on canned goods at high prices, and that the market had dropped.

"Goods are going to be plentiful and cheap, so I suppose you'll stock up during the next few days," hinted the old man.

"Are you?" smiled Ben.

The merchant smiled. It was plain that neither cared to discuss his office plans in a business in which they were rivals.

Click! clack! The telegraph ticker that Desmond had in his library began to reel off a message.

"Belated baseball reports, I suppose," muttered the old man, rising and moving toward the instrument. "No business stuff comes in at this time of the night. Doesn't, eh?" he added quickly, as he gazed at the tape. "Listen to this, Wright. The president this evening signed the order

for the army and navy maneuvers, to take place at once. And a washout on two of the Chicago roads. Whew!"

"What's the matter, sir?" Ben asked, innocently.

"Great Scott, boy, we're caught on the wrong side of the market, after all! The army and navy maneuvers will make a big demand for our kind of goods. And railroad transportation from Chicago will be to the bad for a few days. Whew! And I'm short on canned goods!"

"I can let you have plenty," smiled Ben Wright.

"You?"

"Oh, yes. Up to about a hundred and sixty thousand dollars' worth. And all of my goods that are not in New York are a good ways this side of Chicago."

"On what terms are you selling?"

"The same as the other day," laughed the boy.

"That is, I can save my trade, but not make a dollar!"

"Isn't that pretty kind to a man who's on the wrong side of the market?" Ben demanded, looking up.

John Desmond laughed good-naturedly.

"You've got me again, Wright. How much do you make out of it this time?"

"About forty thousand clear."

"Ben," said the old man, slowly, "don't you think you'd better consider a junior partnership with me?"

"Not for a minute, sir!"

"Why not?"

"I'm too well satisfied with being my own boss."

"Humph! Well, you've reason to be!"

Ben is still in business for himself. The nearest that he has come so far to being connected with John Desmond is that he is now the old man's son-in-law.

Later, when John Desmond retires, Ben will merge the two business houses, with the help of his managing man, Steve Dorsey.

The Hoo-hoos are widely scattered in these days. The Drum got twenty years in Sing Sing, while Kelly committed suicide in his cell.

#### THE END.

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